MARVEL SPOTLIGHT

SUMMER EVENTS

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No time for formalities, this *Spotlight's* loaded with the dirt on Summer 2009's biggest events, with a heaping helping of Ultimate action leading the way. Carry on, *Spotlight* faithful!

I: Mark Millar: Ultimate Architect!

One of the original Ultimate creators is back. In this wide-ranging interview, he tells (almost) all about new title Ultimate Avengers, and how he plans on taking total control of the Ultimate Universe. Bwa-ha-ha-haaaa!

II: An Ultimate Artist From The Old School: Carlos Pacheco

Beloved Avengers artist Pacheco makes a triumphant return to Marvel behind Millar's Ultimate Avengers!

III: Spidey's New Universe: A Spotlight Interview With Brian Michael Bendis

Ultimate originator Bendis takes readers inside Spidey's Ultimate new comic!

IV: Artist Spotlight On David Lafuente

Ultimate Comics Spider-Man's new artist Lafuente swings into action in the shadow of Ultimate legends Bagley and Immonen – making a rapid ascent to great fan acclaim on the way!

V: An Ultimates Evolution With Jeph Loeb

Superstar creative combo Jeph Loeb and Frank Cho takes us into a new era with the highly-anticipated New Ultimates!

VI: Cho Knows New Ultimates!

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VII: Ultimate Cage Match: Millar Vs. Loeb Vs. Bendis!

It's a titanic throwdown between the three Ultimate scribes. Who would win?

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An old favorite returns, with plenty of ITEMS!, Soapbox fare, and Bullpen extras to entice and entertain!

IX: "Solve Everything": Inside The New Fantastic Four

"Write Stuff" writer Jonathan Hickman is on hand to guide us through the new creative dynamic behind the Fantastic Four!

X: Top Secret: The Marvels Project!

Classic Cap combo Ed Brubaker and Steve Epting connect the dots on 70 years of Marvel history in a blistering hot new series!

XI: Mary Jane Is Back! The Return Of The Red-Headed Stranger

Though MIA from Peter Parker's life since "One More Day," she's always been on Marvel's mind. Check out our fun interview with writer Fred Van Lente for more details!

MARK MILLAR

ULTIMATE ARCHITECT

ONE OF THE ORIGINAL ULTIMATE CREATORS IS BACK. AND HE WANTS TO PICK UP WHERE MAGNETO LEFT OFF!

BY JESS HARROLD

There's an old sheriff in town, and he's back to clean up the streets he helped build. No, not Ultimate Nick Fury, who has returned home after a sojourn in the *Squadron Supreme* reality. We're talking Mark Millar: Scottish scribe, Hollywood darling and one of the architects of the Ultimate Universe. But the one-time writer of *Ultimate X-Men*, *Ultimate Fantastic Four* and the phenomenon that was *The Ultimates* has spent the last few years with his feet firmly planted in the original Marvel Universe. When not otherwise occupied taking his own projects like *Wanted* and *American Jesus* to the silver screen, Millar pitted Wolverine against a whole host of Marvel heroes in *Enemy of the State*, then ramped the in-fighting up to a whole new level with *Civil War*. Now, after a year-long run on the book that started it all, *Fantastic Four*, Mark's planning to put the MU's upstart younger sibling back on top of the sales charts. But, after the devastation of *Ultimatum*, the Ultimate Universe isn't quite what he left behind. Helping take the whole line in what a lesser mag than *Spotlight* might call a "bold new direction," Mark finally brings a famous Marvel name to Ultimate Comics. It's Earth's Mightiest Heroes, but not as you know them. It's *Ultimate Avengers*.

Cover to *Ultimate Comics Avengers #1* by Carlos Pacheco.

SPOTLIGHT: In the words of Nick Fury in *Ultimate Avengers #1*, "I disappear for ten minutes and the whole place goes to Hell." Nick's back, after spending time in another universe, and the world he's returning to isn't quite the same one he left. Is that an outlook you can sympathize with?

MARK: Do you know the funny thing? I wrote that without realizing the metatextual element. It was really weird. It was literally just, Nick's been away for a while, he comes back and everything's mental, y'know? It was only about three weeks later when I read over the script when I thought, "Oh God, I hope these other guys don't take offense..."

But, I suppose, it used to be just Brian and me. All the Marvel characters in one universe, and we can play with any of them, just me and my bald friend. It was actually quite glorious and it really felt like our baby. And then, if I'm absolutely honest, and I don't mean this as a slight to the other creators who came on, but it did dip in quality in places. I just gave up on it, really, a lot of books went through a lot of creative teams and I just lost interest, the readers lost interest and the Ultimate books all crumbled really. *Ultimatum* I see as a really good dividing line between the last two or three years and the new stuff, which is all really strong. The original idea for the Ultimate line that Bill Jemas and Joe Quesada came up with was a small number of books, no rubbish miniseries and keep it to really A-list writers and artists. We've gone back to that formula.

line feels like the cool place to be again. I like a lot of what the Marvel Universe has coming up, but I do also love the idea of the quality control in the Ultimate line. I don't know how many books Marvel does a month, something like 70 books, inevitably some are gonna be better than others. But I love the purity that the Ultimate line used to have, that really the four books every month are all pretty good, some excellent. I like the idea of getting back to that, the idea of having the biggest artists and the biggest writers on the biggest characters in a small number of books. I love the idea that readers will then associate the Ultimate brand with value for money.

SPOTLIGHT: That's particularly important in this economy, a whole universe for $16 a month.

MARK: I love that. That was one of the real highlights for me. We did some market research, and in the past 5-10 percent of books go to female readers, but the Ultimate books did 30 percent. It seemed a less daunting place to start. Because even if you pick up something like *Civil War,* which is pretty reader friendly, you do suddenly get a checklist of 150 other books that tie in with it. New readers must be baffled by it. But the Ultimate Universe, like you say, is a pretty small investment – for under $20 a month you can have everything.

SPOTLIGHT: *Ultimate Avengers* – a fan going in cold, knowing only that title, might be a little surprised, right?

"I WANT TO MAKE IT AS DIFFERENT EVEN FROM THE CURRENT LINE OF AVENGERS BOOKS AND THE ULTIMATES AS I CAN."
– WRITER MARK MILLAR, CREATING A BATTLE SPACE FOR ULTIMATE AVENGERS.

SPOTLIGHT: In your view, what is the Ultimate Comics line for?

MARK: I think it should be the 21st century version of Marvel Comics, and Marvel caught up with us. We reinvented the wheel essentially with the Ultimate line and gave it all a freshness. Over the next few years, those reinterpretations of the characters crept into the Marvel books, whether it was Peter Parker being single again or Cap becoming Batman-style hardcore. The X-Men becoming publicly known and all that – lots of the things that made the Ultimate line different were incorporated in, to the point that you had the militarization of the Marvel super heroes. So eventually the Ultimate line looked kind of samey. My idea with *Ultimate Avengers* was to make the book five years fresher than the Marvel book and do the stuff they haven't thought of yet. And no doubt they'll copy it a few years down the line. (*Laughter.*)

SPOTLIGHT: The extent to which the Marvel Universe "caught up" is in no small part down to you and Brian...

MARK: Brian and I sort of drifted off from the Ultimate line a bit. He kept *Ultimate Spider-Man*, but really our attention went much more into the mainstream Marvel Universe with *Civil War* and *Avengers* and that. And now I think the Ultimate

MARK: Hopefully it will not be what they were expecting. I want to make it as different even from the current line of *Avengers* books and *The Ultimates* as I can. What I really wanted to do was go in and do the "daddy" book of the Ultimate Universe – the one that, if you read *Ultimate Comics Spider-Man*, or *New Ultimates* or whatever, you have to buy this one, too.

SPOTLIGHT: This is where the action starts!

MARK: Yeah, this is it, it all kicks off now. *The Ultimates* was a $100 million version of the Avengers. This is gonna be a $300 million version. This is what they can't do in a movie, because it's too expensive. Right now, you almost don't need the comics because they can do it all. Now you've just got to go one step ahead and do something so spectacular they couldn't afford to do it. To have all the Avengers in one comic is amazing, but to actually have the FF and Spider-Man and Wolverine in there too, it's just got to blow you away every month.

SPOTLIGHT: And in the middle of the monthly maelstrom is the returning Nick Fury...

MARK: I loved the idea of Nick being in a similar position to me. A guy that used to be in charge, went off and did some other things, and just comes back and he's cleverly manipu-

HAWKEYE AND CAP: Cap stands with Hawkeye, who's got a new weapon of choice! (Cover art to *UCA #2* by Carlos Pacheco.)

lating everything. He's no longer in charge of S.H.I.E.L.D., Carol Danvers is, and I like the idea of him eventually working his way up over the next couple of years to mess things up for her and put him in charge again. To me, that's an interesting thread running through all the adventures which are gonna happen in *Ultimate Avengers*. He worms his way back through black-ops with an eye to becoming king again; that's the big Shakespearean thing going on in the background.

SPOTLIGHT: And each arc he assembles a new cast of characters to meet the latest threat?

MARK: Yeah, appropriate to whatever the menace is. In the first arc, Cap goes AWOL because he finds out that he's got an illegitimate kid out there the government has kept from him. He also finds out that the son is the world's number one terrorist. It's like Cap finding out that Osama Bin Laden is his kid. So it's a very delicate situation, you can't just send in the regular big guns. Nick Fury then has to assemble a black-ops team that can covertly kill the son, recapture Cap and shut the whole thing up.

SPOTLIGHT: That illegitimate son has been revealed to have a familiar face – or lack thereof...

MARK: It is such a good selling point: Cap's illegitimate son is the Red Skull. I've always been a fan of opposite villains. Batman is all about determination, focus and discipline and the Joker is the opposite. Superman is all about brawn and Lex Luthor is all about brains. Captain America's opposite is the Red Skull, and has been since World War II: one dressed in the American flag, one wearing a swastika. It's perfect. Unfortunately – well, not unfortunately! — we don't live in World War II any more. Somebody wearing a swastika now would be a bit like talking about the Spanish Civil War; it's too far away for people. So we update the idea of what he would be. So this guy is a political weapon for hire. He's very smart, very strong, he likes money and he likes killing things. He despises the West and America in particular. He's a slightly stronger, slightly faster, slightly meaner version of Captain America. And I like the idea of giving him a more direct link with Cap, so Cap has the dilemma that this guy is his own flesh and blood. In some ways it's kind of tragic, and all Cap's fault, which is a great super-hero thing – that idea that he got his girlfriend pregnant and wasn't there for her, and because of that the child grows up to be the Red Skull. It's a good origin for a super villain: the evil son of a super hero.

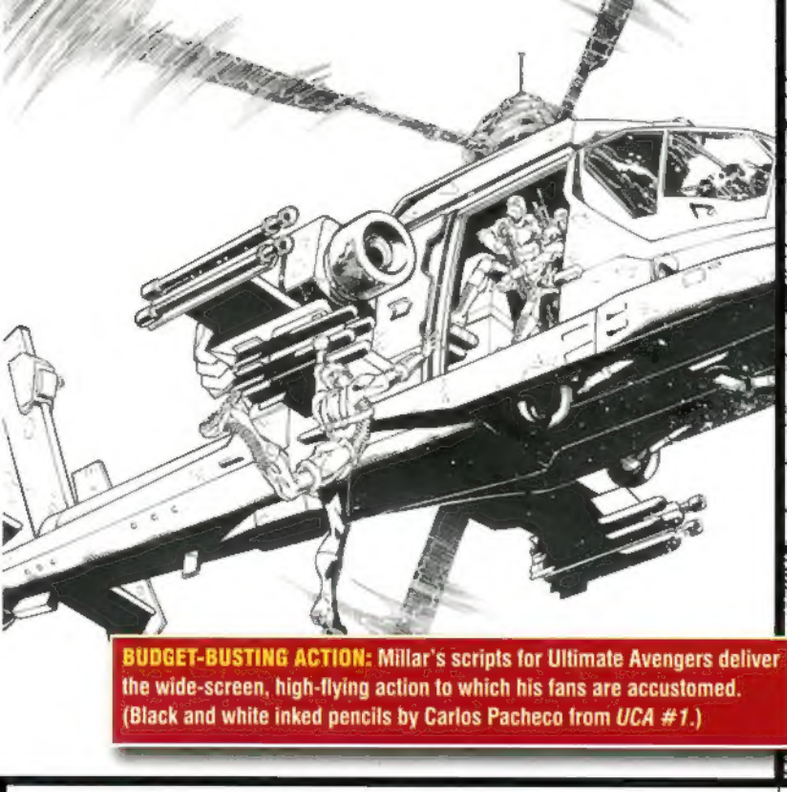
SPOTLIGHT: As your cast rotates, will there be certain key characters that tie the arcs together?

MARK: Absolutely, there are favorites that I just loved doing in *The Ultimates* and it's great having a bit more room to play with. Tony, Cap, Hawkeye and Nick are the cornerstones of this. I'm gonna be using the FF, Spidey, and X-Men characters, but those four are the fundamentals, they are the ones that will be in most of the storylines, and that a lot of the stuff hinges around.

SPOTLIGHT: If Marvel said you could only use one of those four forevermore, whom would you pick?

MARK: Without question, Ultimate Cap. I really love writing Ultimate Tony because it's great writing somebody who is that outrageous, and I love Hawkeye because he's so cocky, but, honestly, I could write four Ultimate Cap books a month. I love doing it, I love the character, I love the fact that he's kind of grumpy, and sort of an old man in a young man's body, isn't

RED SKULL REVISITED: The striking villain variant cover to *UCA #1* by Olivier Coipel.



BUDGET-BUSTING ACTION: Millar's scripts for Ultimate Avengers deliver the wide-screen, high-flying action to which his fans are accustomed. (Black and white inked pencils by Carlos Pacheco from *UCA #1*.)

that keen on the modern world, and likes hanging about with men in their 80s, because they know what songs he's talking about, what movies he's into. He looks like Brad Pitt, but sort of smells like your granddad. I love that man out of time aspect of Cap. I also love the fact that he's kind of stodgy; he's Charlton Heston in a mask. He's a guy who has an old-fashioned black-and-white sense of what the world is, different even from the regular Cap who's a bit more godlike, y'know? I like this Cap because he's a bit of a neo-con; he's a bit more like the presidential candidate John McCain. He's a hawk, he's a stickler for things he understands. Because I'm not like that myself, I'm not right of center, it's actually quite liberating to write someone who is. It means you can put words in his mouth you'd never say yourself.

SPOTLIGHT: Who else do we get to see in the first arc?

MARK: On the black-ops we're going to see that Tony has a brother called Gregory who he absolutely despises. They fell out years ago because Tony got Stark International from his dad. Gregory is the older brother, and he's furious. They have this deal, where Tony has the northern hemisphere of the world, and Gregory has the southern hemisphere. He's Iron Man 2 – the black-ops Iron-Man who will supply S.H.I.E.L.D. with all the horrible stuff that Tony would never consider doing. He's the antithesis of Tony: Tony's an alcoholic womanizer, this guy lives like a monk and doesn't drink. He always wears white suits. He's a really interesting character, and there's more to him than meets the eye. We've got a new Black Widow, who's Nick's ex-wife, who we've never seen before. I like the idea of somebody as cool as Fury having his ex-wife on the team who's a really annoying tiny Asian woman that just makes his life hell. The other one I've got is a new Wasp, who is one of my favorite characters I've taken from the second volume of *The Ultimates*. She's one of the super-terrorists they're trying to reprogram and turn into a good person. I like the idea of having a tiny Wasp who can just kill people like a human bullet: She can move at super speed, and she can fly through people's heads. And we've got the Hulk, but Gregory Stark's black-ops scientists have been working on him and changed his personality. He's got implants on the side of his head. The idea is to have the super-intelligent brain in the monster's body, but it doesn't quite work out like that. In the second arc, there's the African-American Hulk, and he's Banner's old professor. He was the first Hulk but nobody knew anything about him. He's a Stephen Hawking type guy, he's physically handicapped, and invented the Hulk serum for himself and turned him into this big black guy. I mean, he was a black guy to begin with…*(Laughter.)*

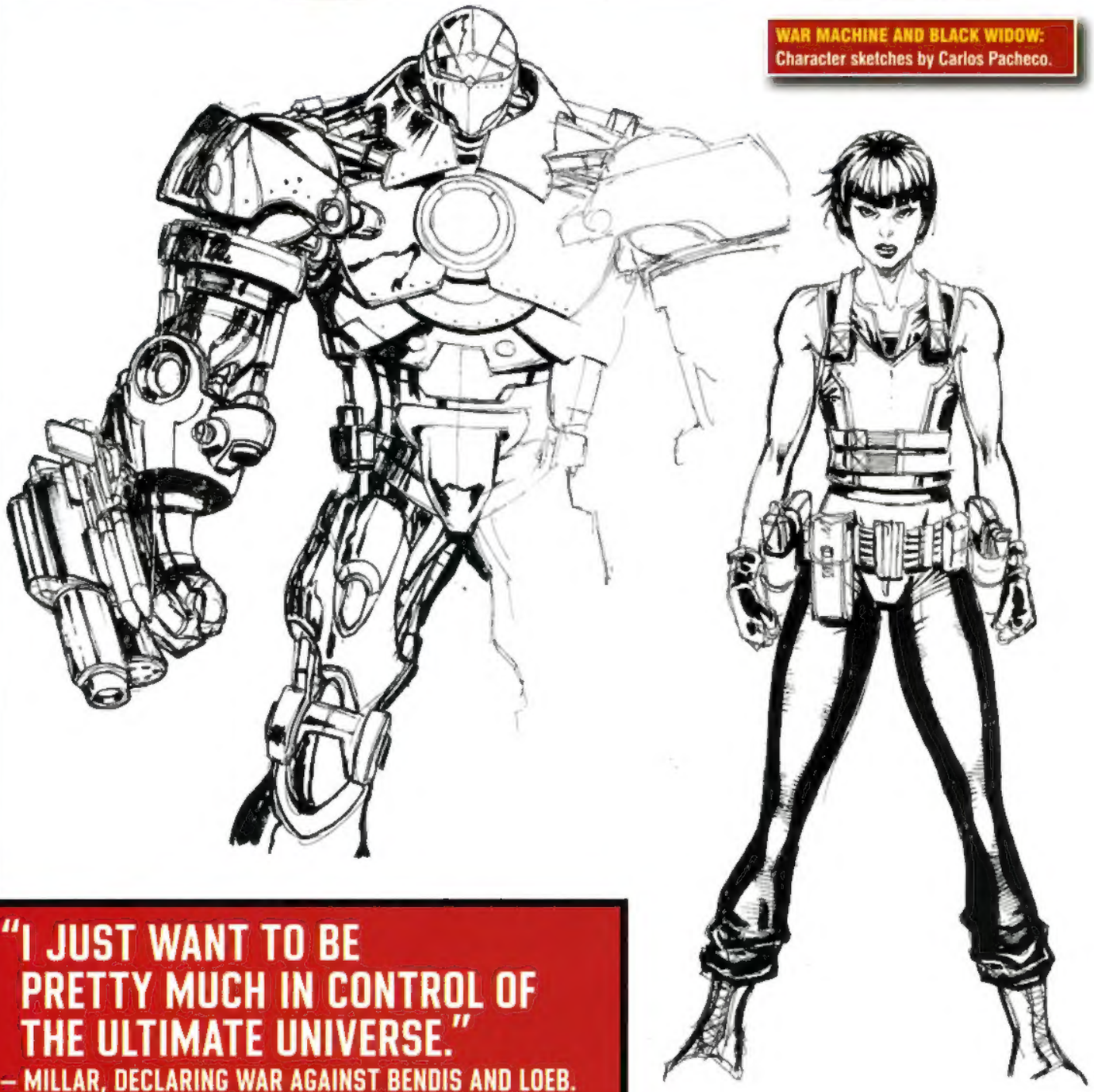
SPOTLIGHT: Stephen Hawking turns into a big black guy. That sounds like your next Millarworld title…

MARK: *(Laughter.)* I've just tried to rethink it all and make it outrageous. The trick with this stuff is to try and constantly think outside the box. The minute you go safe is the minute readers lose interest.

SPOTLIGHT: It sounds like more brand new characters right off the bat than there probably were in the whole run of *The Ultimates*. Are we seeing a push more in the direction of original creations?

MARK: Certainly from me, because I think it's important to open things up. We really spent a few years showing you Nick and Cap and Hawkeye and all those guys, but then I want to

"SO THIS GUY IS A POLITICAL WEAPON FOR HIRE. HE'S VERY SMART, VERY STRONG, HE LIKES MONEY AND HE LIKES KILLING THINGS. HE DESPISES THE WEST AND AMERICA IN PARTICULAR."
– MILLAR ON THE NEW RED SKULL.



WAR MACHINE AND BLACK WIDOW: Character sketches by Carlos Pacheco.

"I JUST WANT TO BE PRETTY MUCH IN CONTROL OF THE ULTIMATE UNIVERSE."
– MILLAR, DECLARING WAR AGAINST BENDIS AND LOEB.

open it up so you start seeing a bit more about them. I just wanted to go deeper. But also at the same time, over these two years I want to go really wide as well and Ultimatize a lot more characters. There's Blade, Ghost Rider as well. I just want to be pretty much in control of the Ultimate Universe. I have fun doing the reinventions, and it worked out really well with the first lot.

SPOTLIGHT: Taking established concepts and giving your own takes on them seems to be a theme in your career, from your Ultimate work to *Red Son* to *American Jesus*. Is that one of your strengths as a writer?

MARK: I think everybody's got their pros and cons. Garth Ennis for example is the best dialogue guy in the business, he has an ear for it unlike anyone I've ever seen before; it's just spectacular. Some guys have got brilliant imaginations, some are great at action scenes or whatever. I suppose if I had to find something that works in my own stuff, it's reinventing something for a modern audience. I didn't intentionally do it, that's just something I've had success with. So I suppose I'm just playing to my strengths with this: all the characters we hadn't touched yet, reinvent them, and the ones we did touch, go deeper.

SPOTLIGHT: I guess it stems from being a big fan of the source material.

MARK: I come to it with a huge enthusiasm for it; I would literally do it for free. I love doing it. It's the best thing in the world. Stan and Jack and Steve Ditko are really my total inspirations. Everything that happened after that I appreciate, but to me you have got to go back to the original creators to really get what something is about. Some guys like Chris Claremont came on and made things like *X-Men* better, especially when he was working with John Byrne, but generally speaking the people who know something best are the people who make it up in the first place. Going back there is always a good place to start. The idea of reinventing something I loved as a kid actually really appeals to me, and I think it's important as well that I don't feel too beholden to what came before. I love it, but I'm prepared to sacrifice the bits that don't work. I know the basics of those

characters, and then I use the basics to give it a modern spin. Like what a producer or a director does with a movie. Molding ideas for a mainstream audience. I think I definitely work better with a mainstream audience than I do with a hardcore fan.

SPOTLIGHT: What upcoming "Ultimatizations" are you most excited about?

MARK: I've already written the first three issues of the next arc, the big one with Ghost Rider. As a kid, my brother had a leather jacket with a blazing skull on the back, which I recognized one of his friends had copied from a *Ghost Rider* comic. I just thought it was the coolest visual. The comic was never great, *Ghost Rider*. It was good sometimes, but that visual was always so much better than the book. So I thought about doing the Ultimate Ghost Rider story, and he's essentially what the second arc entirely hangs around. Leinil Francis Yu is drawing that, and just to see him drawing a big flaming skeleton guy on a motorbike is just going to be spectacular. I just wanted to do action with Ghost Rider like you've never seen before. I've done some sequences that nobody's ever tried in comics. But my favorite Ultimatization is the Punisher. I'm having such a great time. The Punisher is a character I've always wanted to write. I've always loved him through the various incarnations, the best being Garth Ennis'. Just to get to play with Frank Castle was great, and to have him in an Ultimate story alongside Captain America is great fun. The first six or seven pages of it are literally him, just one panel at a time killing people. There's no dialogue, it's just "boom, boom, door kicks open, boom." It's just fun, y'know, to sit and do a character like that. The Punisher's another character I could write every month for the rest of my life.

SPOTLIGHT: You also mentioned Ultimate Blade, right?

MARK: I can't say too much about that right now because it involves a secret that Jeph Loeb's got coming up in one of his books. But Blade'll feature really prominently. There's a second Spider-Man character that I've created, just called The Spider. One of my friends, Jonathan Ross [a British talk show host], recently did a documentary on Steve Ditko and he told me that Ditko said the original color scheme for Spider-Man was orange and purple. The color notes went the wrong way and it ended up red and blue. That just fascinated me that for the last 45 years we could have had Spidey orange and purple. I just thought how interesting it would be to have a character that looked exactly like Spider-Man, but the colors are slightly different. He shows up in the vampire arc and he's a mystery. Nick just sees him sitting in a tank reading James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and eating pieces of meat.

SPOTLIGHT: With so many heroes in play, you must have some major big bads lined up...

MARK: That's what's going to be the biggest difference from *The Ultimates*, which was really the heroes fighting each other, essentially. I'd go issues and issues where there was no traditional hero vs. villain action. We would always have something at the end, like the alien invasion. But here there'll be super villains. You're gonna have the Red Skull, you're gonna have A.I.M., I've even got Dracula planned at some point. I've got Ultron, a lot of classic Avengers villains. A bit of Kang, that's probably my favorite.

SPOTLIGHT: Have you worked out a time travel science that works for the Ultimate Universe?

MARK: Yeah, it'll be simpler than you would get in the Marvel Universe. I don't think a time travel story should be any more complex than *Back to the Future*. It should be something that a seven-year-old can understand. There'll be a time travel element, but it won't be pure sci-fi. I want to bring that same level of realism to the villains that I brought to the heroes. It's going to feel like quite a fundamentally different comic because of that.

SPOTLIGHT: *Ultimates 3* and *Ultimatum* left a lot of traditional Avengers characters off the table. Should dead really mean dead in the Ultimate Universe?

MARK: It's got to, yeah. It would be just so devalued if you saw someone clawing their way back from hell or something like that.

SKULL SMACKDOWN: Cap takes on the Skull in *UCA #1*! (Black and white inked pencils by Carlos Pacheco.)

RED SKULL: More character sketches by Carlos Pacheco, this time featuring the menacing Red Skull.

I mean, you can get away with that in the Marvel Universe, but the thing that makes the Ultimate line different is the realism. If you step away from that then you utterly lose what the Ultimate Universe is about. As much as I'm sad to see some of those characters die — because I loved Hank Pym and Jan — they've got to stay dead; it'd be ludicrous if they came back. But the good thing is, we just take the name and we make it somebody else, and then it's really interesting. We suddenly have this Russian assassin who's the new Wasp. A guy I'm thinking of further down the line is a heroin addict who's the new Giant Man. It's fun to play with.

SPOTLIGHT: The book's title alone shows how comics have changed since the Ultimate line was founded. Back then, a book with Avengers in the title wasn't seen as marketable, right?

MARK: I had to fight to write it, it was really weird. I did *Ultimate X-Men* because it was the first gig Marvel offered me. I'd read three *X-Men* comics before I started writing it: I thought Wolverine was super strong and stuff like that. The one I really wanted to do was the Avengers, and they said to me, "*Captain America* is selling 40,000, *Iron-Man* is selling 35,000, I know you love the Avengers books but X-Men is where it's at right now." I said, "Look, Kurt Busiek has done a brilliant job on *Avengers*, I love that book." They said, "Why don't you just do Ultimate Wolverine instead?" Eventually they said just do your book but don't call it Ultimate Avengers because the brand name doesn't sell. Bryan actually came up with the name "The Ultimates." At first I thought it sounded so cheesy, but it's weird how quickly something becomes what it is. Then the *Avengers* franchise bit by bit got cool as well. It probably occupies the position that 15 years ago the X-Men held. I would say the Avengers are really the cornerstone of the Marvel Universe. So we've done something really obscene here by taking the two biggest brands in the industry of the last ten years and fused them into *Ultimate Avengers*. If this doesn't sell extraordinarily well, something's gone horribly wrong.

SPOTLIGHT: Your takes on certain Avengers characters, particularly Nick Fury, seem to have found their way into Marvel movies. What is it about the Ultimate versions of these heroes that Hollywood folk relate to?

MARK: They're good! They're really easy to understand. I think, especially around about 1998, if you looked at a Marvel Comic, it was like, ah, no, the reason he has a lisp is because his son's from an alternate universe and he's a great descendant of Galactus. And you're, like, "What?!?" I think the Ultimate line just simplified everything: He's a World War II super-soldier who defrosted 50 years later. Just break it down to its absolute essentials. The movie guys appreciate that, because that's what they try and do, too. So in a way, we kind of did their job for them.

In a way the Ultimate line has formed the template of the entire Marvel movie business, which I think is fantastic. (*Iron Man* director) Jon Favreau told me when I was out there at the meeting that they did Ultimate Tony. (Marvel Universe) Tony's never been that flamboyant. My guy is the sort of guy who's playing nude chess with Playbunnies, whereas the regular Tony maybe had a beautiful girl on his arm but he wasn't that outrageous Downey Jr. charac-

ter. It was amazing, I was very flattered to see that on screen. Then when I heard about the Sam Jackson thing I just thought it was hysterical. We talked about so many variations of what he could look like, and I think it was Bryan that came up with Sam Jackson The idea that that's now become real, manifest in front of us!

Some pals say to me are you not pissed off that they're doing your characters and you're not getting paid for it, you won't even get a credit for it probably. I'm, like, the *Wanted* comic came out and was really big because of *The Ultimates* gig, and then I got a Hollywood career based on that. If I wasn't doing those big Marvel comics, none of that stuff would have happened. I see it as incredibly fortuitous, if the work-for-hire stuff goes on and gets utilized I couldn't be happier with it.

SPOTLIGHT: Now, this is going to be the only place to find you at Marvel for the next couple of years, right?

MARK: The next two years I'm doing nothing else. I'm doing Millarworld books, but this is my only Marvel project. Joe said to me, you can't do that. And I said, if you think about it, any Marvel story I've got to tell I can do it here. If I want to do a Wolverine-based story, Nick Fury gets Wolverine. I think it is the best gig in the world. I'm desperate to get onto the next storylines because I can work with a whole new bunch of characters.

SPOTLIGHT: But at 6 issues per story, that's only 4 arcs. Any chance you'll stay longer?

MARK: I think two years is about my attention span, and I also think its readers' attention spans. I think things go off the boil I think you can maintain hotness for 24 issues, but after that people start talking about peaks and troughs. Friends say to me you should stay on things longer and capitalize on your success. But I do find it quite exciting and challenging to take the risk and fire myself every 24 issues. It keeps you fresh Comics are really expensive, you shouldn't be hacking it out You should always be trying to reinvent yourself and do something new so the readers get their money's worth.

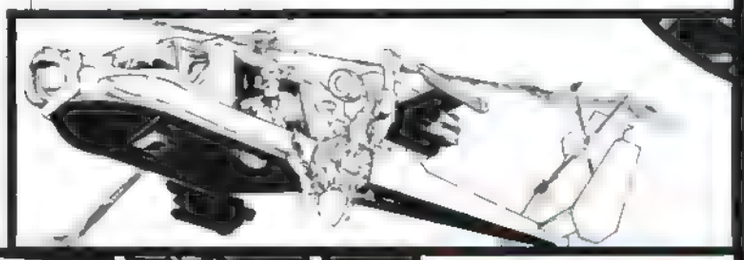
SPOTLIGHT: Speaking of money's worth, you have stellar art talent lined up, including Leinil Yu and, on the first arc, *Avengers Forever* artist Carlos Pacheco. It must be incredible working with guys like these...

MARK: Carlos is great. I usually despise all mainland Europeans, and I find myself loving Carlos. I've been checking him out since *The Flash*, before he was famous. I've wanted to work with him my whole professional life. To be on his first big gig at Marvel, and an *Avengers* book as well, on every level it's a treat. He's so professional, gets the work done, and it's all going to come out on time. It's beautiful. Leinil is probably my favorite current artist. He and I have talked about working together for five years. I talked him over from DC a few years ago, then he went and did *New Avengers* with Bendis. I was so pissed off! I've been waiting on him for three years! It's like Christmas seeing the pages coming up.

SPOTLIGHT: Will the rotating art teams help prevent the delays that *The Ultimates* suffered?

MARK: The beauty is, all the guys are working on this simultaneously so we could almost bring the book out every two weeks Bryan had 24 issues to do, so if Bryan was late it was all late, y'know? That was part of my plan because I actually want to up the sequencing. I'd actually like to see 18 come out a year, because I can write them. I've written a chunk of them already. My ambition is to have all four artists working at the same time and have the opposite of delays, whatever that's called.

SPOTLIGHT: So maybe we can squeeze more than 24 issues out of you in two years!



HAWKEYE IN ACTION: Making leaping out of a helicopter look like a day at the job, Hawkeye leaps into action. (Black and white inked pencils by Carlos Pacheco.)

MARK: 24 issues is the plan. Unless it's a spectacular success and I want to bleed more money out of it! In my head its 24, because I've got the ending worked out, it's very specific what happens. Nick Fury is either gonna get what he wants or not

SPOTLIGHT: You're obviously confident about *Ultimate Avengers*, but is there a strong sense of competition in the Ultimate Comics bullpen over whose book will sell the most?

MARK: Some call it a competition, I call it a bloodbath. I think we'll do 20,000 more than their best book. I'm pretty confident. I'm especially looking forward to beating Loeb. That will be funny, because I know it'll piss him off. Brian's such a nice person that it wouldn't really piss him off. But Loeb is so competitive it's hilarious He loved saying that *Ultimates 3* outsold *The Ultimates*, but he's got like 14 covers on every one! I take great pleasure in *Old Man Logan* this month outselling *Ultimatum*, but I'll take even more pleasure in *Ultimate Avengers* destroying *New Ultimates* ●

ULTIMATE COMICS AVENGERS #1 IN STORES AUGUST 2009!

TIME OUT OF MIND: Cap crosses time with immortus in an Avengers classic! (Art from *Avengers Forever #7* by Pacheco, soon to be collected in oversized hardcover.)

AN ULTIMATE ARTIST FROM THE OLD SCHOOL

CARLOS PACHECO RETURNS TO MARVEL IN A VERY BIG WAY WITH *ULTIMATE AVENGERS*!

BY DUGAN TRODGLEN

Ultimate Avengers marks the return of artist Carlos Pacheco to the House of Ideas. With his solid draftsmanship and "no idea is too big" approach, Carlos has been one of the top artists in the field for over a decade. Before moving to DC a few years ago, he made his mark on Avengers history (and we mean all of Avengers history) with *Avengers Forever*, the classic 12-issue series co-conceived with Kurt Busiek and Roger Stern that encompassed every era of the Avengers: past, present, and future. He's also had memorable turns on *Fantastic Four*, *X-Men* and *Excalibur*. Carlos has always been an old-school comics fan, delighting in the minutia of classic Marvel tales, so it was a little surprising to see him turn to the "don't look back" world of the Ultimate Universe for his Marvel reentry. But as you can see from this interview, this is right where Carlos Pacheco wants to be.

Art from Avengers Forever #11 by Carlos Pacheco.

THERE'S QUASAR, BUT WHERE'S WALDO? How many Avengers can you count in this wonderful Pacheco splash page? (Art from *Avengers Forever #1* by Pacheco.)

"THE ULTIMATE BOOKS ARE SOME OF THE BEST BOOKS MARVEL HAS LAUNCHED IN THE LAST TWENTY YEARS. FRESH IDEAS WITH FRESH VERSIONS OF THE CHARACTERS WE KNEW ALONG WITH SOME FANTASTIC ART."
– ARTIST CARLOS PACHECO

SPOTLIGHT: Carlos, it's so great to see you draw the Avengers again. Was this an easy choice for your first project back at Marvel?

CARLOS: I had this choice in mind for years. The Ultimate books are some of the best books Marvel has launched in the last twenty years. Fresh ideas with fresh versions of the characters we knew along with some fantastic art. The book has plenty of the kind of energy that makes you dream about expanding the limits of what you read in their pages.

Every time I talked to Jeph Loeb or Joe Quesada about coming back to Marvel I always insisted on the idea of creating an *Ultimate Avengers* book. The concept was free to being used – after all the only people who knew the Ultimates are the Avengers are we, the readers. In the Ultimate universe the concept of "Avengers" didn't exist, so it was a logical choice. So when Jeph told me Mark was coming back to the Ultimate Universe to work on *Ultimate Avengers* and to then have them offer me the chance to work with him on this book, honestly…I hit the jackpot (pun intended)!

SPOTLIGHT: *Avengers Forever*, the project you did over ten (!) years ago, is a very fondly remembered, seminal Avengers story. It's known, however, for being steeped in Avengers lore and continuity. The Ultimate line's mission statement is to not be beholden to the past. How has that distinction affected your approach?

CARLOS: Oh my! "Ten years…ten years singing right out loudddd…" Oh my…*[Forgive the Crosby, Stills and Nash quote, folks! –Ed.]*

Avengers Forever was a couple of authors that loved to play with the history of the characters. We turned over the toy box and played with everything that fell out. What I'm doing now is different. I was specifically looking for this new approach. We played with continuity in the past; now let's create the *Ultimate Avengers* continuity.

(Hey…Isn't this guy Perun the Soviet hero who was created by Mark Gruenwald…? Ok, ok…shut up, Carlos…)

SPOTLIGHT: Yeah, don't get carried away there, Carlos! *(Laughter.)* It's not quite the characters you grew up with, but has the opportunity to draw *Ultimate Avengers* given you a freedom you wouldn't have if it were the same characters?

CARLOS: Freedom and super heroes (classical or Ultimates) are two words that don't always go together. There are rules to follow when working with established characters, but there are other rules as well; other paths to follow; other directions to work in. Anyway, to be free from the old rules is a sort of freedom, yes.

SPOTLIGHT: How distinct do you see these characters from their Marvel Universe counterparts?

CARLOS: Sometimes they are so far from the Marvel Universe counterparts that I see them as totally different characters. Epecially Captain America. He's not Jimmy Stewart anymore. They are psychologically different as is the society where they live. But they keep the names, for what is worth.

SPOTLIGHT: As a big Marvel Universe buff, did you ever see yourself working in the Ultimate U?

CARLOS: The Ultimate Universe is the place where I've wanted to be for a while.

SPOTLIGHT: How much have you followed Bryan Hitch's designs and how much free reign have you been given for things like costumes and set pieces?

CARLOS: Bryan added the realistic elements that the concepts created by Millar needed. His "authority" is gonna be clearly respected. [*Again, pun intended. Carlos and his puns! – Ed.*]

SPOTLIGHT: One of Mark Millar's strengths is his ability to come up with incredible showcases for his collaborators. He seems to say, "I'd love to see him draw this!" and figures out a way to put it in the story, no matter how outrageous. Have you been surprised or particularly amused by some of the things that appear in his scripts?

CARLOS: Definitely. His twists in the story; in the characters' interactions. But I'm sure you'll understand I can't talk about anything specific yet.

SPOTLIGHT: That Red Skull design is frightening! How much input from Mark were you given for that?

CARLOS: Oh, thank you. It's the most horrible recreation I've ever done, that's true. Mark asked me to include some tattoos and I made the decision that these tattoos would be all crazy like that. He doesn't have a mask but he has plenty of scars. He's almost a true red skull, with strange tattoos..

SPOTLIGHT: Who else have you enjoyed drawing in a manner radically different from the traditional version?

CARLOS: The Spider, that's for sure! Everybody expected a sort of Spider-Man with different colors, but I decided to take it in another direction. And though I tried to have an eye on the classical Steve Ditko design, the final result is quite different.

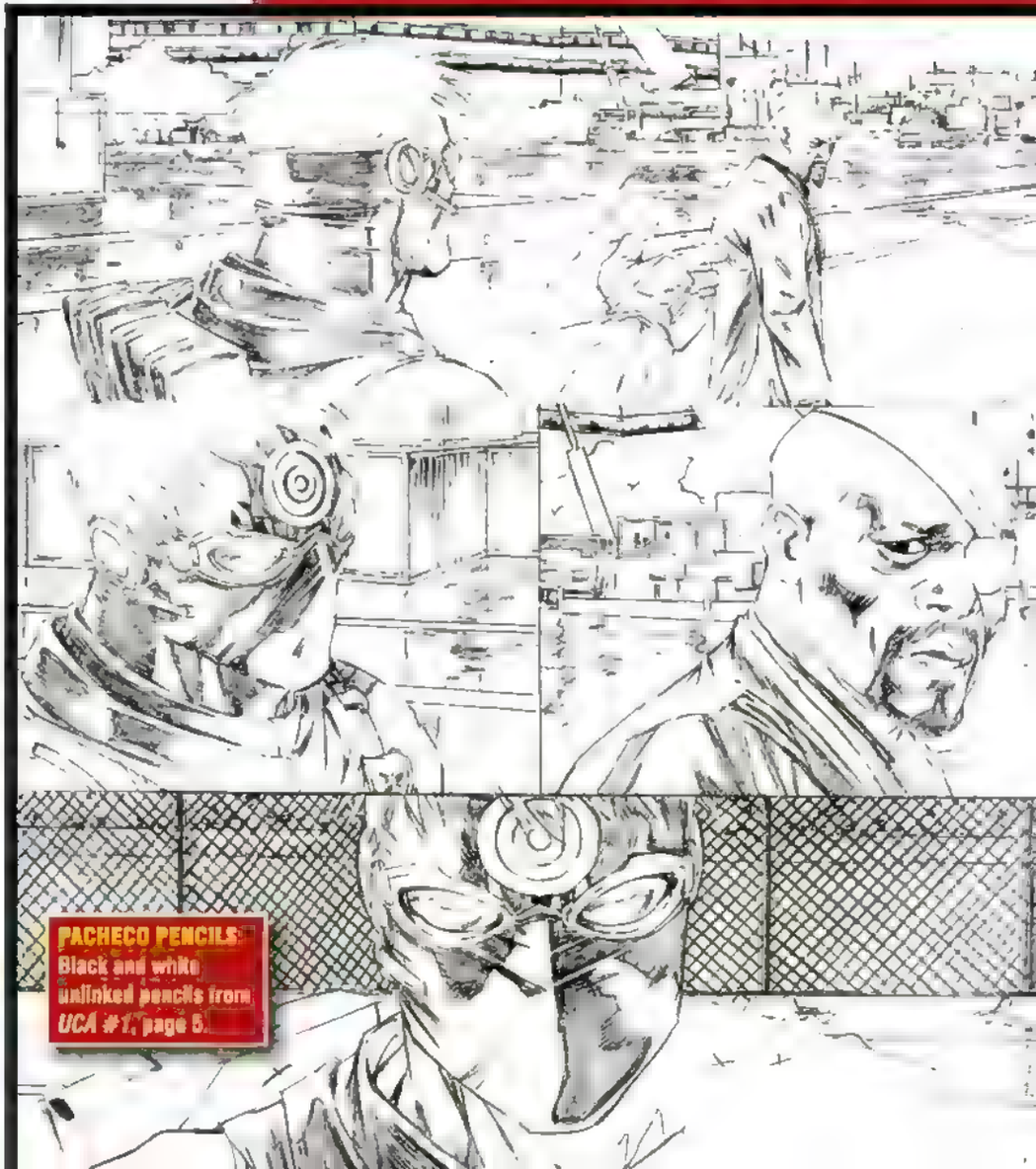
SPOTLIGHT: Has the sales juggernaut that *Ultimates* was been on your mind as you work on *Ultimate Avengers*?

CARLOS: Honestly, no. In fact I don't know how well the *Ultimates* have sold. I just knew *Ultimates* is one of the few books that keep this old comic fan's excitement for super heroes high.

SPOTLIGHT: Since the time *Ultimates* first debuted, the Marvel U Avengers has become the foremost franchise in comics. How do you keep their Ultimate counterpart ahead of the game?

CARLOS: We're simply expanding the Ultimates playground. More characters, more Millar...more fun... ●

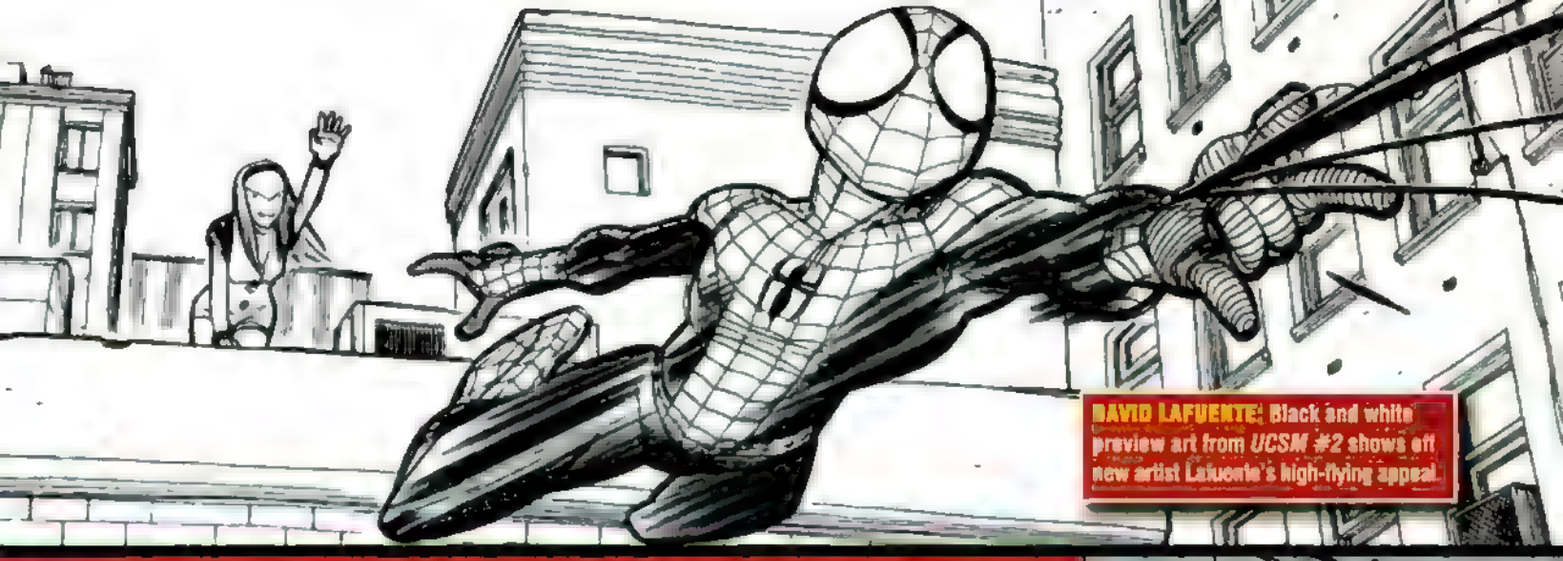
Sounds like Carlos is pretty excited. So are we about the powerhouse creative team behind ULTIMATE AVENGERS. Thanks to both Mark Millar and Carlos for sitting with us for these wide-ranging interviews. Look for their new title to hit store shelves in August. It'll be the ultimate! (Pun intended!)



PACHECO PENCILS: Black and white unlinked pencils from *UCA #1*, page 5.

Wraparound cover to *Ultimate Comics Spider-Man* #1 by David Lafuente.

VS
ULTIMATE ORIGINATOR
BRIAN MICHAEL BENDIS
TAKES READERS
INSIDE SPIDER-MAN'S
ULTIMATE NEW COMIC!
BY CHRIS ARRANT
VERSE



DAVID LAFUENTE: Black and white preview art from *UCSM #2* shows off new artist Lafuente's high-flying appeal.

Call it what you will – the flagship, the lynchpin, the glue to Marvel's Ultimate Universe, *Ultimate Spider-Man* has been the cornerstone of Marvel's Ultimate line of books since its founding ten years ago, and with the major changes that *Ultimatum* brought it leaked into *Ultimate Spider-Man*. *Ultimate Spider-Man* is no more. Issue #133 proved to be the final one, capping off the series with the thought that Spider-Man might be among the victims in the aftermath of the larger tragedy. But as seen in the pages of the two-issue miniseries *Ultimate Spider-Man Requiem*, Peter Parker was found amongst the rubble – and he and the other survivors of the Ultimate Wave are rebuilding after the tragedy. And in the wake of such epic tragedy, things change. For the first time in Peter's *Ultimate* life, he's seen in a positive light by the public at large – thanks to an unlikely source... J. Jonah Jameson. The status quo has changed – consider this Ultimate Spider-Man 2.0, otherwise known as *Ultimate Comics Spider-Man*, a new title that debuts this July. In many ways this new #1 is a continuation of the original *Ultimate Spider-Man* series, but it's also a jumping-on point for new readers as Spider-Man and his entire cast – friend and foe – are at a new point in their lives, with writer Brian Michael Bendis promising the most unique situation for Peter Parker yet.

SPOTLIGHT: It's good to talk to you again, Brian. You're becoming a regular here at *Marvel Spotlight* – not like anyone's complaining. Let's get into it, then. At the end of the original *Ultimate Spider-Man* series in *#133*, you left off with the thought that Peter Parker might be dead. Although the two subsequent *Requiem* issues proved otherwise, what led you to go this route for the first series' finale?

BRIAN: Well, the finale of the actual series has a real foreboding feeling that Peter has died... and died being a hero. The *Requiem* issues focused on the fact that those heroic acts were finally viewed as such by the public and not misunderstood as they had been in the past.

That's best illustrated when J. Jonah Jameson, who has always hated Spider-Man and portrayed him in an unglamorous light to make a profit at the *Daily Bugle*, finally sees the error of his ways. J. Jonah Jameson doesn't hate Spidey at all – he just wants to sell papers, and so far that's been by slamming Peter.

But during the Ultimatum Wave attack, Jonah witnessed Peter's selflessness working as a true hero. His whole life up to that point as a journalist has been looking down at Spider-Man, but *Requiem* is him confessing to the world his wrongdoings and relating a couple untold tales of Spider-Man from the past that clearly define Spidey as a hero. At the time, Jonah had those stories put away unpublished because it didn't further his agenda. But the stories told in *Requiem* reveal Jonah's greatest act of journalism in craft and honesty, showing the truer side of Spider-Man to the reading public.

Not to ruin *Requiem #2* for you, but those who've read it know that in that issue the Avengers dig people out of the rubble – including Spider-Man. So Peter's waking up to this new world where he's a hero and a celebrity – maybe the greatest of all. When *Ultimate Comics Spider-Man* #1 debuts, one of the major changes in Spidey's life is that he's no longer the misunderstood hero – he is a hero that is recognized by the entire city of New York, wherever he goes. He's thanked and beloved for his acts during the Ultimatum Wave.

Factoring that in with Peter's underdog history, there's a lot of humorous mileage to be made as Peter is not very comfortable with his new status. With people throwing themselves at him he's like "What?" He revels in his underdog status, and now that he's a sort of folk hero he's caught off-guard.

SPOTLIGHT: It seems like there's a big shift from *Ultimate Spider-Man* to the new *Ultimate Comics Spider-Man* status quo – but just how big is it?

BRIAN: The shift is quite dramatic. The Ultimatum Wave destroyed New York City and millions of people died in that. So the status quo of everyone's life has changed – not just Peter's. *Ultimate Comics Spider-Man* #1 opens a few months after the final issue of *Ultimate Spider-Man*, and New York City is reopened, rebuilt and rejuvenated. The entire status quo of Peter's life has changed. What we'll see in the first story arc is a giant picture of what Peter's life is like now – who's living in his house, who he's dating and all those things. One of the most exciting things about

the new series for me is the chance to jump ahead and tell Spider-Man stories you've never seen in any medium before – comics, film, television, books or video games.

SPOTLIGHT: Or on stage, thinking about the upcoming Spider-Man musical? *(Laughter.)*

BRIAN: (*Laughter.*) Yes. With *Ultimate Comics Spider-Man #1*, I have a grand opportunity to do a story that is classic Spider-Man, but the elements themselves are very different. The objective is to present things you've never seen before.

Similar to what happened when I introduced Kitty Pryde into *Ultimate Spider-Man* – up to that point, most of *Ultimate Spider-Man* had been reinterpretations of events from Spider-Man's original continuity but the injection of a new love interest with no ties to previous stories was a big leap for the comic – and for fans. You know you always worry if people will hate it because someone's edging Mary Jane out of the picture, but Peter's relationship with Kitty went over very well with fans. You know you see on some TV shows where the introduction of a new love interest sours the fan base – not so with *Ultimate Spider-Man*.

NEW YORK, NEW YORK: The Big Apple is still Spidey's Ultimate home. (Art from *UCSM #1*.)

"PETER'S WAKING UP TO THIS NEW WORLD WHERE HE'S A HERO AND A CELEBRITY – MAYBE THE GREATEST OF ALL."

– WRITER BRIAN MICHAEL BENDIS ON UCSM'S NEW OUTLOOK

WHO IS THE SHROUD? The identity of Spidey's new foe (or friend?) is shrouded in mystery! (Art from *UCSM #1*.)

I was inspired by that to find other elements that we could introduce that didn't have parallels with the original continuity that still seemed true to the characters of the Spider-Man title.

SPOTLIGHT: That echoes the original sentiments you and Mark Millar had when you founded the Ultimate Universe some ten years ago.

BRIAN: You're right. When the Ultimate books debuted, it became quickly clear that Mark and I had the best job in comics: all the toys and none of the crap, not only when it comes to continuity where we can just pick which elements we wanted to use, but also in that everything's fresh. And that was very appealing to me.

And here we are 10 years later –

SPOTLIGHT: Can you believe it? *(Laughter.)*

BRIAN: (*Laughter.*) No, I can't. But now I'm getting the opportunity to step back and look at the landscape so far and ask myself, "What's the next step? What would appeal to me most as a reader?"

While I wouldn't go so far as to say the Ultimate line was revolutionary when it began, I will say it was definitely forward-thinking. The ideas introduced in the Ultimate line have now become standard in Marvel and with other companies – not just in terms of story, but also in elements such as the recap page in the beginning, or the trade paperback program that was once special, but which is now pretty standard in comics.

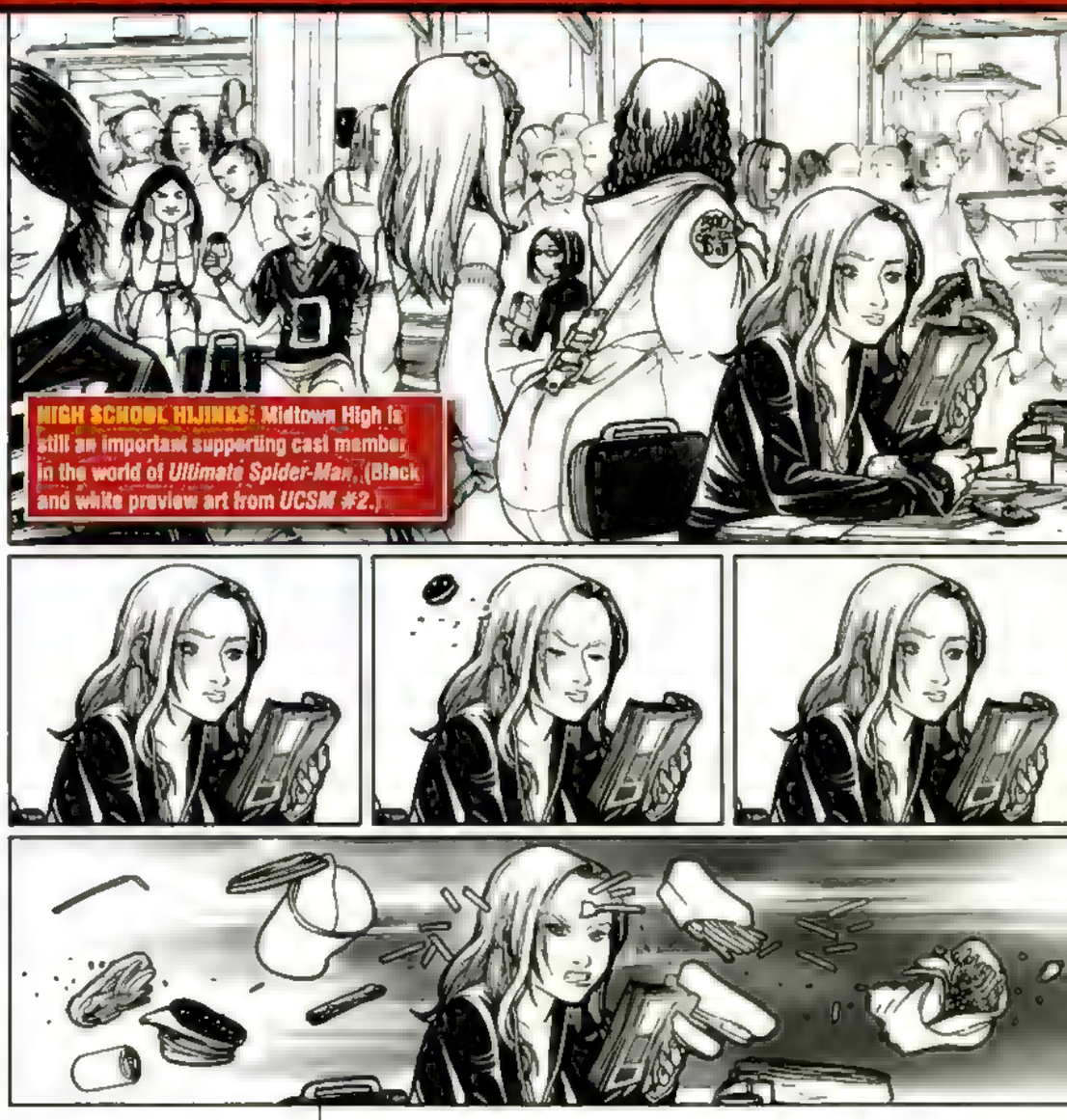
But the original voices of the Ultimate line – Mark and I – have spread out to the entire Marvel line. Mark's done *Civil War* and *Wolverine*, and I'm doing *New Avengers* and *Secret Invasion*. So now we get to step back and decide what's next.

SPOTLIGHT: And speaking of what's next, I want to know who Spider-Man's going to be facing in the pages of the new series. In the recent *Ultimate Spider-Man Annual #3* you introduced an Ultimate version of the classic Spidey foe, Mysterio. Will we be seeing more of him in the new series?

"I WAS INSPIRED . . . TO FIND OTHER ELEMENTS THAT WE COULD INTRODUCE THAT DIDN'T HAVE PARALLELS WITH THE ORIGINAL CONTINUITY THAT STILL SEEMED TRUE TO THE CHARACTERS..."
– BENDIS ON TREADING NEW GROUND IN UCSM.

BRIAN: Yes. I introduced two things in that one-shot that'll show up in the new series.

The first is Mysterio: he's been the one big Spider-Man villain that hadn't been introduced into the Ultimate universe yet; I'd been purposely holding him back from quite some time. Mysterio will be a villain in the same threat level that Norman Osborne and the Kingpin have been to Spider-Man – the top tier. In the first volume, the Norman and Kingpin stories came to their logical conclusions so with this new volume we have the larger threat of Mysterio, mixed with smaller threats from brand new Ultimate villains – not Ultimate versions of old characters, but completely new villains.



HIGH SCHOOL HIJINKS: Midtown High is still an important supporting cast member in the world of *Ultimate Spider-Man*. (Black and white preview art from *UCSM #2*.)

SPOTLIGHT: So no more classic characters Ultimatized?

BRIAN: No, we'll still be doing that. We're bringing in some very esoteric but living inventions that were a part of the 1967 Spider-Man television show. Some of it is whacked out and crazy, but there's a couple really interesting things in there that could work with a nice polish.

More importantly we're adding a new flavor and new characters, and that's something I've wanted to do for some time now but we've been involved with telling other stories in *Ultimate Spider-Man*. With the Ultimatum Wave hitting and the jump forward, I'm now getting the chance to do those stories.

SPOTLIGHT: You mentioned a second thing introduced in the *Ultimate Spider-Man Annual #3* that'll show up in the new series – what's that?

BRIAN: The other thing was the debut of the work of artist David Lafuente. He's an amazing artist and an unbelievable talent. [*See our Lafuente feature following this interview to see what Brian's talking about! – Ed.*] I'd seen his work in a couple places, and when he was working on the *Annual*, I noticed he was very unique. With then-*Ultimate Spider-Man* artist Stuart Immonen moving over to join me on *New Avengers*, David's schedule was open and he was a perfect fit to help launch this new series.

David's been working diligently on pages for *Ultimate Comics Spider-Man* for some time now, and everyone I've showed pages to are amazed at how big of a splash he's making.

SPOTLIGHT: Yes, my editor just showed me the unlettered black & white pages and they're beautiful and dynamic. Was David's assignment on the Annual a try-out gig for being the artist for the new series or just a coincidence?

BRIAN: Well, as you find out in life, everything is a tryout. As the pages from the *Annual* were coming in I loved it; I told my editor, "I gotta keep working with this guy!" It's the same way I connected with *Secret Invasion* artist Leinil Yu: He did a *Civil War*-era issue of *New Avengers* and I got chills when Leinil's pages started coming in. Not only is his art beautiful, but we work well together – and that's something you can't fabricate.

MORE PREVIEW ART:
Enigmatic scene from *UCSM #2*.

I've worked with other artists of whom I'm a big fan, but for some reason it just doesn't mesh as well. There's a certain magic you can't imitate when I find a perfect collaborator like the likes of Leinil, David or Stuart. So when this happens it's very exciting, and David Lafuente and I seem to be simpatico on a lot of things.

I don't even remember that the relaunch was in the works during the production of *Ultimate Spider-Man Annual* #3, but I knew I wanted to work with David again on something. I told him as much, saying "Let's work on something that'll blow people's minds!" So when the relaunch came up, it all came into place and we started working right away to get as many issues in the can before the series launched.

SPOTLIGHT: I can tell – my editor tells me that you wrote *Ultimate Comics Spider-Man #1* back in February, so that's a five-month lead time.

But before we get too "inside baseball," let's talk more about the story coming up. The advance solicitation for the first issue promises a new supporting cast. One of the amazing things about *Ultimate Spider-Man* has been its diverse cast, from Kong to Kitty Pride, both Gwen and MJ, and stalwart Aunt May. Will they be "moving out," so to speak?

BRIAN: There are certain characters that are staying, as well as new additions to the cast. And with every new addition to the mix, there are a dozen new story ideas as they relate to their interactions with other elements of Peter's life

SPOTLIGHT: Casting our net wider to the other Ultimate books, will this title be doing any interactions or crossovers with other Ultimate titles?

BRIAN: Just like we did in the early days of the line, everyone's going to stick to their own books and find their footing first. There will be references and fly-bys but no team-ups for awhile. When everyone gets settled, we might have some guest stars. Everyone will stay in their own books for awhile though; we've found that's the best way to go, the most charming way to go. Mark, Jeph and I will launch the individual titles and build those up first.

SPOTLIGHT: I read an interesting thing recently – in another interview you stated that you considered leaving the book with the shift to the new title. Could you tell us about that, and why you ultimately decided to stick around?

BRIAN: Well, at certain times in your life you come to these kinds of crossroads, and that certainly happened with *Ultimate Spider-Man*. I'd been enjoying writing the book immensely, but when *Ultimatum* hit it seemed it might be a transition point.

The first time I got on the phone with (Marvel Editor-In-Chief) Joe Quesada and mentioned my thoughts, he didn't even know what I was talking about. "Do you still enjoy writing it?" he asked. "No one's asking you to go."

And just after that at one of our creative retreats where (*Ultimatum* writer) Jeph Loeb was present I asked the group if I should stay on or maybe go to another *Ultimate* title. I was again reminded that no one was bringing this up but me. And earlier that afternoon I had just spent time putting down all the ideas on paper for what would be the first story arc of the new *Ultimate Comics Spider-Man* series.

But you feel torn, like watching *The Simpsons* which is still on the air and they're all the same age doing well, but on the other hand you don't want to be Noah Wyle on *ER*.

SPOTLIGHT: *(Laughter.)* You don't want to outstay your welcome.

BRIAN: Right. But after much appraisal, I decided I'm not there yet. This is the best job in comics, and that's not hyperbole. I'm left alone with the Spider-Man toy box and allowed to completely express myself through it. I've had some amazing, *amazing* jobs throughout the years, but there's nothing better than doing this comic. ●

You are not there yet, Brian. You do not have permission to leave Ultimate Spider-Man. (Or rather, ULTIMATE COMICS SPIDER-MAN! Give us a little time on that one...) Anyone who's read the Ultimatum issues of USM knows you're still bringing the goods in dramatic, sensitively rendered ways. So fans of Spidey, Bendis and the Ultimate Universe, if they haven't already, should track down the first ish of UCSM, on stands next week!

NEXT: NEW ULTIMATE SPIDEY ARTIST INTERVIEW!

ULTIMATE COMICS SPIDER-MAN'S HOT NEW ARTIST SWINGS INTO ACTION!

BY SHEILA JOHNSON

As the first title to be launched in the now expansive Ultimate Marvel line, *Ultimate Spider-Man* was a risk. Its writer, Brian Michael Bendis, re-imagined the origin of Peter Parker's alter-ego for a more contemporary readership, and its first penciler, Mark Bagley, captured Spidey's world with a new kind of kinetic energy. It could have failed. Instead, it became a success; it provided a foundation for three successful movies and, at the time of this writing, has run for one hundred thirty-three issues. The groundbreaking series told readers, "The Ultimate Universe is one of change. It is a place for the new, the exciting, and the daring." Now, as the characters of the Ultimate Universe struggle through the events of the wide-reaching and devastating *Ultimatum* event – and as readers ponder what has happened to Peter Parker – Bendis prepares to restart the Ultimate adventures of Peter Parker in *Ultimate Comics Spider-Man* with several changes, one being a new artist handling pencils and inks for the series following second penciler Stuart Immonen: David Lafuente. Though Lafuente is a newcomer to comics, Marvel's readers have seen his playful, animated style most notably in *Patsy Walker: Hellcat*, *Ultimate Spider-Man Annual #3* , and covers for *Runaways*, as well as in one-shot stories in *Spider-Man Family* and *X-Men: Divided We Stand*. Lafuente recently chatted with Marvel Spotlight about his background and how it feels to be the ongoing artist for the next chapter in the life of Spider-Man.

ARTIST SPOTLIGHT ON: DAVID LAFUENTE

Artist David Lafuente's charming work from *Ultimate Spider-Man Annual #3.*

HELLCAT: David's first series work was the five-issue *Patsy Walker: Hellcat* mini. (Art from *Patsy Walker: Hellcat* #1.)

SPOTLIGHT: First, can you confirm some biographical details? Intel says you're twenty-six and currently living in London. Is this correct?

DAVID LAFUENTE: That's right. I was born in '82 in Gijon, a town in the north of Spain, and moved to London two years ago, in 2007.

SPOTLIGHT: What made you decide to become a penciler? How old were you when you made that decision? Did you ponder any other careers?

DAVID: It was more the sum of little choices over a few years rather than a thunder that hit my brain one morning. (*Laughter*). I've always loved comic books and drawing, but I didn't see comics as a career. When I was in high school, I decided I wanted to dedicate my life to work on something artistic, though I didn't know what exactly. It was instinctive. By that time, I met Javier Rodriguez (colorist of *Amazing Spider-Man* among a lot of other things) and Igor Medio, two great comic artists that lived in my hometown. I believe that changed things for me somehow, the idea of becoming a comic art pro appeared because of them. Real people working in comics. I wanted that, too. I guess that started the process of changing my hobby into a real job I'm passionate about.

Time passed and I went to a school of arts and crafts. One thing led to another and I found myself working as a freelance illustrator, a career that I actually pursued (and enjoyed) but as a way of living only, because the comics industry in Spain is very limited. My target at every moment was comic books. Since 2000, I did illustrations for books, handbooks, magazines, political cartoons for newspapers, etc. to pay the bills, and in between gigs I worked on my comics. Some short stories here, some failed project there. The small steps every comic creator has to take.

I also worked as tour guide, but I didn't ponder it, not even for a second (more laughs)

SPOTLIGHT: You got the job drawing *Patsy Walker: Hellcat* from meeting [Marvel editor and writer] C.B. Cebulski. How did you come to work on *Spider-Man Family* and *X-Men: Divided We Stand* before that?

DAVID: I knew the Spanish artist Kano for some time. He was working on a book and asked me if I would be interested in collaborating with him as an assistant, doing backgrounds, layouts and some flat coloring. I accepted, I love his work and he's a really nice person. We did some books together, among them, *Spider-Man Family*. Shortly after, I met the very cool C.B. and

he brought my work to the offices. Nick Lowe contacted me to draw the Patsy mini-series that was in the works. And while Kathryn was writing the first script, he offered me these two X-Men short stories written by C.B. and Christopher Yost.

SPOTLIGHT: How would you describe your tone in Ultimate *Spider-Man*? Will you be approaching the ongoing series work differently than you did *Ultimate Spider-Man Annual #3*?

DAVID: I'm proud of how the Annual turned out, I think what Brian and I did there worked well, so I'm trying to build on top of that for the ongoing. Push further.

SPOTLIGHT: Do you have a different approach coming in as the new artist on a long-running series versus working on a limited series?

DAVID: In terms of preproduction, yes. When I got the gig for the ongoing, knowing that I was staying for a while, I thought it would pay to do my homework. The action in Spidey occurs in the Ultimate Universe, has a very large supporting cast and specific landmarks like the Triskelion, FF tower... I had to find my feet with all this. That means I read the entire series in a row plus annuals, bookmarked specific issues for future reference, spent some time sketching MJ, Kong, Gwen, looking for clothing according to their personality, some loose blueprints for kitchens and household areas and things like that. I did this to a certain extent with the Annual, but due to timing, couldn't do all that I've done now; that was the difference.

SPOTLIGHT: What do you like most about drawing Webhead? What aspect of drawing *Ultimate Spider-Man* is the most challenging for you?

DAVID: The most challenging is to do justice to Brian's scripts. They are very tricky and complex in places, which is great because it forces me to work harder. It's also very important to me to take good care of the non-super hero characters. As a reader, probably the thing I enjoyed the most of *Ultimate Spider-Man* was the way the supporting cast is portrayed, both in how they talk (that is Brian's area), and how they move and act; that was Bagley and Immonen's...and now is mine. Keeping that aspect as sharp as ever is key in this series, I believe.

I enjoy drawing Spidey, because of the body language and the costume: that has a design that is never praised enough. And the person behind the mask...Well, I will leave the spoilers to Brian.

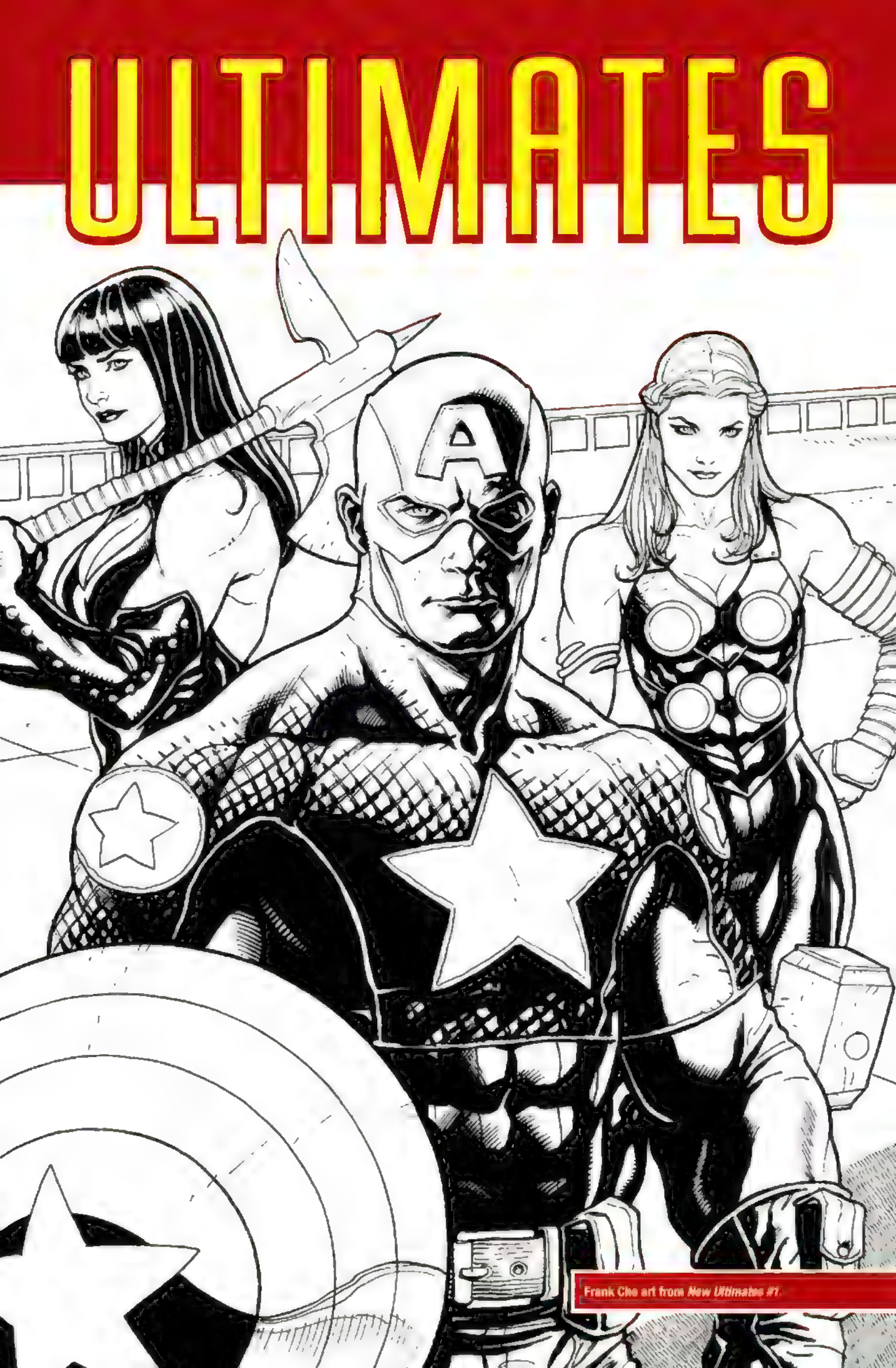
SPOTLIGHT: Finally, are you working on any other projects right now besides Spidey and the covers for *Runaways*?

DAVID: But, but... is it not enough?! (*Laughter.*) I've done a short story for Kieron Gillen and Jamie McKelvie's *Phonogram: The Singles Club* and I have pending another short story, but for the moment, all my energies are dedicated to *Ultimate Comics Spider-Man*. ●

NEW BLOOD: Now regular artist on *Ultimate Comics Spider-Man*, Lafuente's kinetically cartoony style fits the book's mood perfectly. (Art from *UCSM #1*.)

May this "for the moment" last a long time, David! SPOTLIGHT loved your work in PATSY WALKER, HELLCAT and are super-excited about what's to come in ULTIMATE COMICS SPIDER-MAN!

ULTIMATES



Frank Cho art from *New Ultimates #1*

SUPERSTAR CREATOR COMBO JEPH LOEB AND FRANK CHO TAKE US INTO A NEW ERA WITH NEW ULTIMATES!

By Jess Harrold

EVOLUTION

He's blown up Spider-Man: He's sent Thor to Hel. He's snapped Charles Xavier's neck. He's squished Dr. Strange's head. And he's let the Blob have Wasp as a tasty snack. But all that was just Jeph Loeb's palate cleanser for the main course to come. Having devastated the Ultimate Universe in *Ultimatum,* Jeph is front and center in the rebuilding project. The *Ultimates 3* scribe and *Ultimate Power* co-writer may have been late to the Ultimate party first time around, but he's the life and soul of the brain trust for version 2.0. Jeph wowed readers with his purple prose in *Spider-Man: Blue, Daredevil: Yellow and Hulk: Gray.* He recently struck gold with a red twist on ol' green-genes in the white-hot *Hulk.* Now he's bringing his colorful approach to the pages of *New Ultimates.* Spotlight was tickled pink to ask him all about it.

SPOTLIGHT: For any reader looking to dip their toes in the Ultimate waters for the first time – or anyone looking to revisit after some time away – what is the state of the Universe post-*Ultimatum?* What do they need to know?

JEPH: The world is rebuilding what they can. Some things are lost, like Wakanda due to earthquakes, which is relevant because now the Black Panther is the true son of a lost world. The Savage Land has been destroyed by volcanoes and Ka-Zar and Shanna, along with the two Zabus, have left for New York City. It's unclear who remains in what's left of the Savage Land. The most striking is the number of mutants who were murdered by Magneto. Those few who survived have since fled, their whereabouts largely unknown. Some will turn up in *Ultimate Comics Spider-Man,* but the rest will remain in hiding. The mutant registration act is in full force and, unlike the Marvel Universe, it was and will remain successful from the Government's point of view. Its concept is very simple: If you are a mutant, you must turn yourself in to the authorities. You will then be detained for an indefinite period of time. If you do not and you are found out, you will be shot on sight. A very clear line as to why so many mutants have not surfaced. But that may change. The X-Men have a way of dealing with revolution…

SPOTLIGHT: Do you think it was important to use a series like *Ultimatum* to bring down the curtain on the first act, and clear the deck for the Ultimate Comics relaunch?

JEPH: This was always the plan. And to be fair, while it was my story, I had a lot of help. We put together Joe Quesada, Brian Michael Bendis, Mark Millar, Damon Lindelof, Allan Heinberg and Dan Buckley. We worked on how *Ultimatum* would end and what we could expect from the Ultimate Universe in its aftermath. All very, very exciting stuff. When you put together a team like that you can see the unique stories to come.

SPOTLIGHT: What was broken about the Ultimate line that needed fixing in such radical fashion?

JEPH: Nothing was broken, per se. But the Ultimate Universe was intended to be a place where you should expect the unexpected. After nearly 10 years, that became more and more difficult to do. Eventually you do run into your own continuity and that was getting blurred with the Marvel Universe. With fresh ideas and top talent we're taking the best run at these new stories we can imagine.

SPOTLIGHT: You certainly seized the chance to shake up the universe on Ultimatum. On top of devastating Manhattan, you must claim the record for killing the most high-profile Marvel characters in a single series. And we're talking dead dead, not *Infinity Gauntlet* dead. Moving forward, are they all permanent, as far as you're concerned?

JEPH: Yes. Dead really *is* dead. There are no surprise revivals. There may be characters we have never seen before who can now come forward, but everyone who died in Ultimatum was given a funeral – unlike the stories in the Marvel Universe, where you never know, simply because that's a toy box where you may need to revisit those characters. In the Ultimate Universe, it has always functioned as a "real" universe. So, how do the remaining heroes survive in the aftermath of something this devastating?

SPOTLIGHT: Maybe even more surprising than the number of deaths was the brutality of some of them: pretty shocking stuff for a mainstream super hero comic, more like horror in places. What influenced you to take the series in that darker direction?

JEPH: Everyone involved, David Finch, Editor Mark Paniccia, Assistant Editor Lauren Sankovitch and I talked about what these deaths were going to be like. We had a chance for the villains to actually cut loose. Battle is not a pretty thing.

MURDEROUS MAGNETO: Killing Xavier and drowning Manhattan underneath a tidal wave were only two of the many crimes perpetrated in Jeph Loeb and David Finch's Ultimatum, the series that set the stage for the new Ultimate Universe! (Art from *Ultimatum #1-2*)

War is not intended to be pleasant. The end of the Ultimate Universe was brutal. And now it's time to rebuild. Most importantly, the deaths were not random. We didn't just say, "OK, let's kill so-and-so". As the months pass and the new books are geared up, you'll see more and more why it was important for the old and new characters to work together, knowing how much was lost. Knowing how real the losses on both sides were.

SPOTLIGHT: How much of the "horror" aspect of some of those scenes came from you, and how much from David Finch? He must have had a blast drawing scenes like the Blob eating the Wasp.

JEPH: I write a very detailed script. But it's an architect's blueprint. David had the difficult task of bringing it all to life and he did it brilliantly. And yeah, the Blob was particularly "ewwwy!"

Marvel has assembled a talent roster that would make any company stand up and take notice – with Bendis, Millar, Carlos Pacheco, Arthur Adams, Frank Cho and David Lafuente. And that's just for starters.

SPOTLIGHT: To what extent will prior continuity be reflected in Ultimate Comics? Will you be directly exploring the way the world has changed as a result of the events in *Ultimatum*, or is it more of an "all that stuff happened, but let's never speak of it again" approach?

JEPH: Nothing is erased. In the aftermath of any great tragedy there are a number of reactions, all grief-related. The world is in pain, that's not going to go away. Some will deal with it by pressing on, some will have collapsed, some will cry and some will laugh it off.

"DEAD REALLY IS DEAD. THERE ARE NO SURPRISE REVIVALS."

– Writer Jeph Loeb on Ultimatum's body count

SPOTLIGHT: Are we likely to see more of that kind of tone moving forward with Ultimate Comics? Is it one way of differentiating the line from the Marvel Universe?

JEPH: I'm not sure it's very different from where it originated. If you go back and look at what Millar was doing in *The Ultimates* – from Cap beating the crap out of Hank Pym and the Hulk eating people to Pym spraying his wife The Wasp with ant spray – it's a brutal world already. But, yes, in my books in particular, I keep an eye out as to how far we can push things.

SPOTLIGHT: With that in mind, who do you see as the target audience for Ultimate Comics? The books were always intended to be accessible for new readers, but that doesn't necessarily mean young readers...

JEPH: We all tell stories we want the greatest number of readers to come to. Young, old, human, alien, whatever.

SPOTLIGHT: Are you confident that lightning can strike twice, and that Ultimate Comics can be as successful as the initial launch?

JEPH: Given the stories I've heard and the talent assembled, that's certainly the plan. And given the huge success of *Ultimatum*, we are hoping the trend will continue.

SPOTLIGHT: Turning directly to your title, when *Avengers* became *New Avengers*, it signaled a pretty radical departure in the way the team worked and particularly its membership. Does the same title tweak here signify a different status quo for your team, and a dramatic shift in roster?

JEPH: Different roster, different direction. Millar and I have taken the teams, split up some of the characters and will play out different tactics. His is a black ops super secret-attack squad going after the hush-hush. My book is the front and center, media-driven gang. That makes

"THERE'S VERY LITTLE FRANK CAN'T DO AND EVEN LESS HE CAN'T DO WELL...YES, HE DRAWS A HELLUVA 'HELA'..."

Loeb on *New Ultimates* artist Frank Cho

things complicated. There will be new characters, new interactions, new romances and a new leader. None of those things will go down easily for the old bunch either.

SPOTLIGHT: Media-driven – so these guys are the celebrity heroes of the Ultimate Universe? I guess some characters will find fame more attractive than others…

JEPH: Not unlike what Mark introduced in *The Ultimates*. They were always celebrities. Tony threw huge parties. Under the new world order – and it will be important how the *New Ultimates* are structured – that sort of thing is frowned upon. But, having lived out here in Hollywood, you can't control that sort of thing. The less you give the media, the more the frenzy goes. So we'll see how that unfolds.

SPOTLIGHT: Now, tell the truth: Is *New Ultimates* just a chance for you to grab your favorite characters like many fans think Brian did with *New Avengers*? Ultimate Red Hulk?

JEPH: No plans for an Ultimate Red Hulk...yet! Believe it or not, Bendis and I don't grab characters because they are in the toy box. The stories dictate who is needed and we bring what's best for the story. Are there things that began in *Ultimates 3* that will tie into the new group? Yes. But there are some very big differences too. My hope is we see the success that Brian did with *New Avengers*. That would be amazing.

SPOTLIGHT: You mentioned Black Panther and Ka-Zar earlier. Do you have a lot of urban jungle action planned for those guys?

JEPH: They have similar backgrounds. Black Panther comes from a more advanced technological society, but if you know the Panther's origin (told in *Ultimate Captain America Annual #1*), it's difficult for him to communicate. So friendships are hard to come by, and he's been betrayed by S.H.I.E.L.D. and Nick Fury so it makes for interesting conflict. Ka-Zar is much more wide eyed – New York is an exciting place: fashion, food… in many ways he needs to be kept on a leash! Or at least Shanna thinks so!

SPOTLIGHT: You mentioned the difference between *New Ultimates* and Mark's *Ultimate Avengers* book, but will there be much character crossover between the two?

JEPH: There will be no crossover between the two. The best description is that my book operates in the day and Mark's is hidden in the night. There are members of New Ultimates who don't even know the Ultimate Avengers exist. The *world* doesn't know the Ultimate Avengers exist. But both will have missions of enormous importance for the safety of the Ultimate Universe.

SPOTLIGHT: Mark's dealing with some new twists on classic *Avengers* villains in his book. What threats and nemeses are your team going to face?

THE HEROES OF *ULTIMATUM*: Standing tall to the very end, Captain America, Iron Man, Hawkeye and Valkyrie. (Art from *Ultimatum #3* by Finch.)

JEPH: Let's just say that in the aftermath of what happened to Thor in Ultimatum, Earth is left without a Norse God to protect us. That creates an opening for Loki's return. His revenge is awesome.

SPOTLIGHT: You are fortunate to have Frank Cho on board as artist. To what extent do you bear the artist you're working with in mind when casting a new team book like this?

JEPH: Totally. Frank and I had been working on *Hulk* in the Marvel Universe and I told him what I had in mind for *New Ultimates.* He immediately took to how different it was from his *Mighty Avengers* run and wanted to be part of it. The size and scope of this story is huge and Frank's depiction of my words is simply astonishing. I'm thrilled every time I see a page!

SPOTLIGHT: What do you think his strengths are as an artist? Are you a writer that changes your style greatly to play to those strengths?

JEPH: There's very little Frank can't do and even less he can't do well. He's got the power of Jack Kirby, the design style of Steranko and uniquely dazzling detail of Geof Darrow. When you see this double page spread of Loki's army, you're gonna flip out. Oh, and I'm sure I don't need to mention that he draws hot women. Very hot women. Fortunately with Valkyrie, Zarda and Shanna we've got a good start in that regard. And wait until you get a load of the villainesses!

SPOTLIGHT: Can we get a Hela yeah?

JEPH: Yes, he draws a helluva Hela... (*Ouch!*)

SPOTLIGHT: Way back when, an *Ultimates 4* with Ed McGuinness was teased at the same time as the *Ultimates 3* book you eventually did with Joe Madureira. Will story ideas you had planned for that feed into *New Ultimates*? Is there any chance we'll see Ed's work on the team further down the line?

"NOTHING IS ERASED"
Loeb on post-*Ultimatum* fallout

JEPH: I'd love to have Ed come onboard with anything I'm doing. Ed did draw quite a bit of what was going to be *Ultimates 4* – but *Ultimatum* changed all that, storywise. The first half of the book, which involved Zarda and Captain America, we repurposed into the *Ultimate Hulk Annual.* Brilliant stuff. But Ed's a little busy right now with a book called *Hulk*... you might have heard of it! *(Laughter.)*

SPOTLIGHT: We'll have to check it out...You mention Zarda, who of course originated in the *Supreme Power* and *Squadron Supreme* world as a bit of a Wonder Woman gone wrong. We have seen little of her since she crossed over to the Ultimate world in *Ultimate Power*; is this the series that you think will make her a break-out star?

JEPH: Wonder who? You mean that guy with the sunglasses and red leisure suit? *(Laughter.)* Seriously, I always liked Zarda as a character and when *Ultimate Power* happened, we traded Nick Fury for her. The unfortunate thing – and this is the nature of timing – we were almost finished with *Ultimates 3* and she'd been in the Ultimate Universe for about a year. There was nowhere to tell stories with her. I tried to cover some of that in the *Ultimate Cap Annual.* She's a goddess – at least in her own mind – who will take anything she wants as her own. She took down the Ultimate Hulk in more ways than one! Seeing her operate in a more confined arena as she will be in *New Ultimates* will be interesting.

SPOTLIGHT: Are you guys working to create the sense of a more cohesive universe this time? The schedule problems that afflicted some of the original Ultimate books meant that there was often little correlation between them.

ULTIMATE COVER SPREAD! All five covers of *Ultimatum* connect together for a triumphant tableau of the story's central cast of characters. (*Covers to Ultimatum #1-5.*)

JEPH: It is one universe. The mutant registration act makes it difficult for everyone, for example. But, much like the real world where news stories in New York don't necessarily affect those in L.A., our books run on their own paths but are respectful of each other's stories.

SPOTLIGHT: Speaking of respect, how would you describe your working relationship with Mark and Brian? Are you in constant communication, conference-calling, poking each other on Facebook, that kind of thing?

JEPH: Email for me. We share scripts, artwork, ideas. I consider them the best in the business so it's helpful to pick their brains.

SPOTLIGHT: I asked Mark if there was a strong sense of competition between you guys. He said he saw it as less of a competition than a bloodbath, and reckons he'll outsell the best book you and Brian can put out by 20,000 copies. You're not going to take that lying down, right?

JEPH: Mark has a terrific sense of humor. Just hilarious.

SPOTLIGHT: Very magnanimous of you! So, as long as *New Ultimates*, *Ultimate Avengers* and *Ultimate Spider-Man* take the top three spots in the sales charts, you don't mind who takes gold, silver and bronze?

JEPH: Hey, if you want to take it to Vegas, have at it! *(Laughter.)*

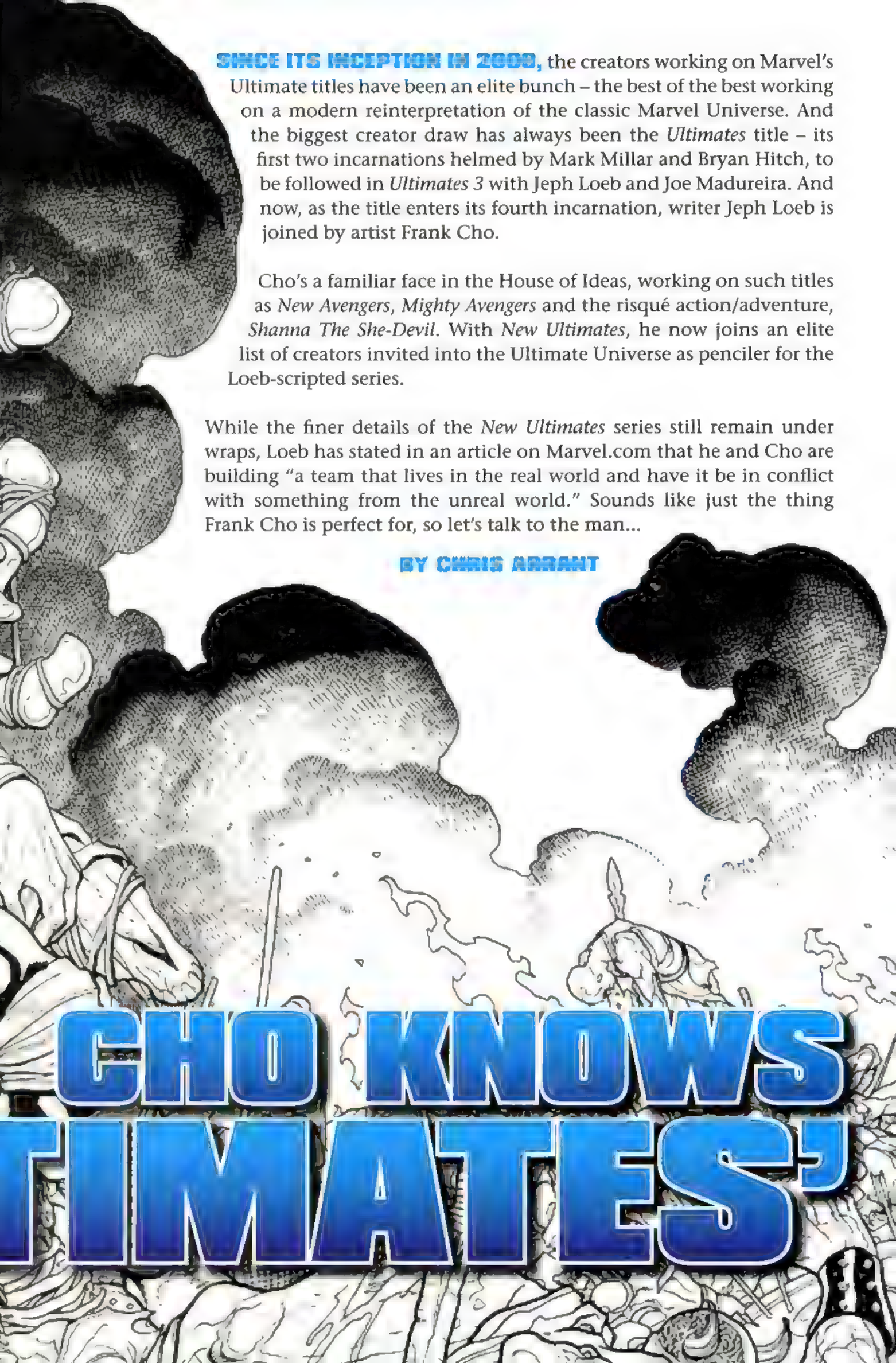
SPOTLIGHT: Lastly, you're a writer whose projects certainly get them talking on the message boards, and we're sure *New Ultimates* will be no different…

JEPH: All I can do is tell the best stories I can and hope that folks like them. Judging from our sales and rankings each month, millions of people do. I'm very grateful to the readers and retailers, I never take them for granted. I'm having the time of my life and I hope it shows in the work. It's a very exciting time to work in comics!

KA-ZAR AND SHANKA: The prince of the Savage Land, his bride and pet tigers are four new additions to the scenery in *New Ultimates #1*. (And, hey, is that Black Panther?)

It's okay to come out of the basement – Ultimatum *is over! It will be another tasty course after Millar and Pacheco's* New Avengers *and Bendis and Lafuente's* Ultimate Comics Spider-Man *have set the table!* •

NEW ULT



CHO KNOWS 'TIMATES'

SINCE ITS INCEPTION IN 2000, the creators working on Marvel's Ultimate titles have been an elite bunch – the best of the best working on a modern reinterpretation of the classic Marvel Universe. And the biggest creator draw has always been the *Ultimates* title – its first two incarnations helmed by Mark Millar and Bryan Hitch, to be followed in *Ultimates 3* with Jeph Loeb and Joe Madureira. And now, as the title enters its fourth incarnation, writer Jeph Loeb is joined by artist Frank Cho.

Cho's a familiar face in the House of Ideas, working on such titles as *New Avengers*, *Mighty Avengers* and the risqué action/adventure, *Shanna The She-Devil*. With *New Ultimates*, he now joins an elite list of creators invited into the Ultimate Universe as penciler for the Loeb-scripted series.

While the finer details of the *New Ultimates* series still remain under wraps, Loeb has stated in an article on Marvel.com that he and Cho are building "a team that lives in the real world and have it be in conflict with something from the unreal world." Sounds like just the thing Frank Cho is perfect for, so let's talk to the man...

BY CHRIS ARRANT

SPOTLIGHT: Hey Frank, thanks for talking to us. I hear you furiously sketching away as we talk, so we won't take up *too* much of your time. Just enough to get the scoop.

In recent years you've worked on almost every variety of Avengers, from *Mighty* to *New...*, but *New Ultimates* seems by far the most unique. How would you contrast the teams?

FRANK: With the old books, there were certain guidelines and character histories that you couldn't really deviate from. But with *New Ultimates*, it's like the wild frontier – anything goes.

SPOTLIGHT: Although you've done some great covers here and there, this title is your first real foray into the Ultimate Universe. What's it been like for you working on this book?

FRANK: Jeph and I have a very specific plan for what we want to do. It's like a fanboy dream, reimagining characters and their behaviors, history and situations in a way you've always wanted to see but never could in the regular Marvel Universe.

Working on an *Ultimate* title is like doing a big budget movie where you can do whatever you want to make this the greatest comic book ever.

SPOTLIGHT: In an article on Marvel.com, Jeph said that you two are trying to "build a team that lives in the real world and have it be in conflict with something from the unreal world." Can you give us a glimpse at the kinds of stuff you'll be drawing?

FRANK: I don't want to give too much away, but I can say that early on we feature a massive invasion by Loki and a group of trolls, Frost Giants and dragons from Asgard. In some ways it's kind of like *Lord of the Rings* where Loki and his army are invading Manhattan to do one thing; it's less an invasion but more a surgical strike – with one precise goal in mind.

SPOTLIGHT: Sounds exciting. Where are the Ultimates in all this?

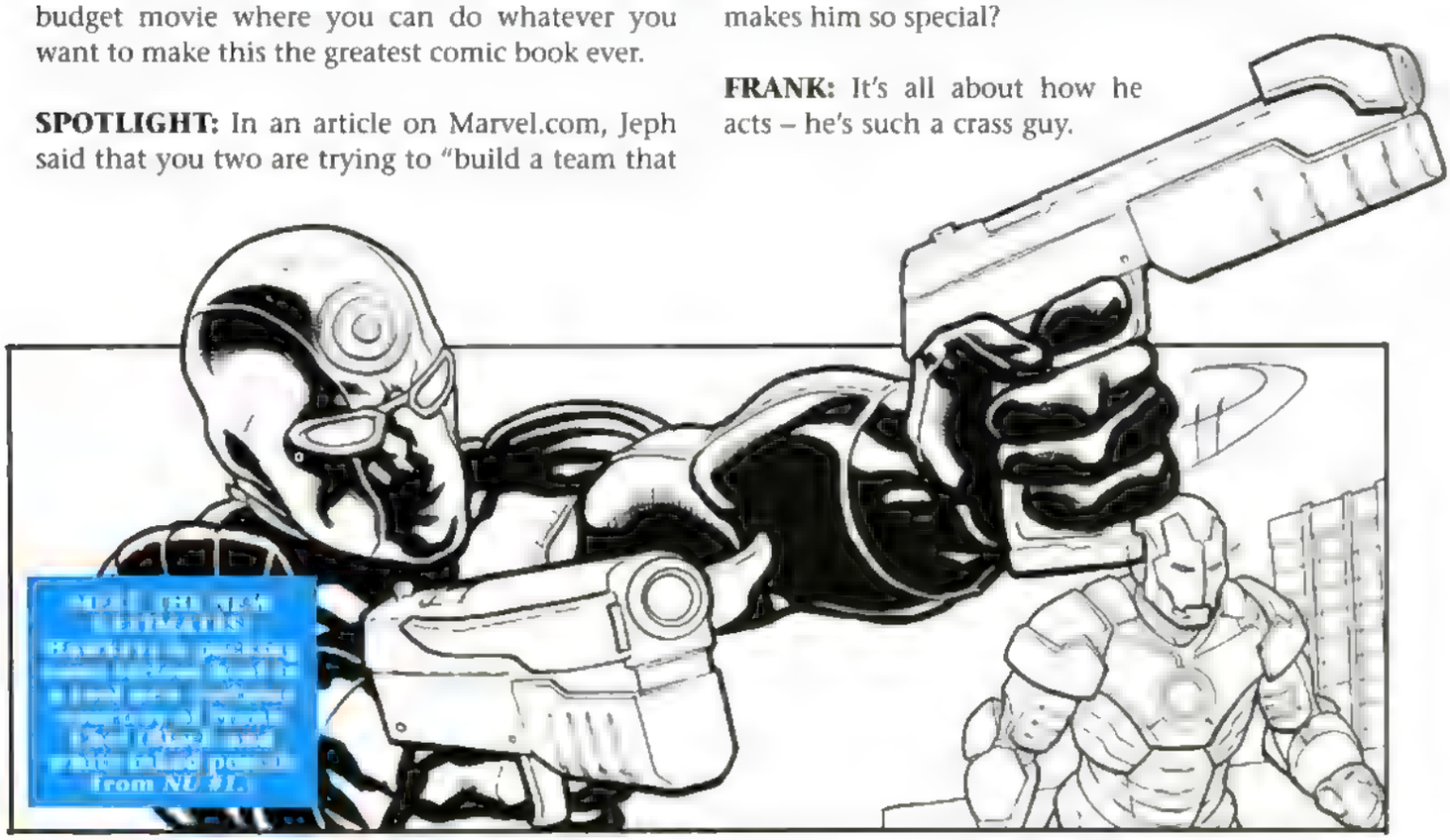
FRANK: The New Ultimates are fractured and trying to recover from the events of *Ultimatum*. In that storyline the entire world was devastated – physically, emotionally and mentally. While the New Ultimates are trying to recover, Loki strikes.

"...YOU WANT TO STAY TRUE TO THEIR CLASSIC LOOK WHILE ADAPTING THEM TO THE REAL WORLD SITUATIONS PRESENT IN THE ULTIMATE BOOKS."

– Cho on his approach to Ultimate character design.

SPOTLIGHT: Let's talk about the team itself. Over on your excellent blog (www.libertymeadows.com), you wrote about how much fun you're having illustrating Tony Stark (aka Iron Man.) What makes him so special?

FRANK: It's all about how he acts – he's such a crass guy.



(Laughter.) He's basically Hugh Hefner. He's shagging everything – if it's got legs and a heartbeat, he's shagging it.

SPOTLIGHT: Yowza! I'd like to see Robert Downey Jr. try that in the new movie. Besides Tony Stark, can you tell us some other familiar faces we'll be seeing in *New Ultimates*?

FRANK: Our lineup is pretty classic – Captain America, Iron Man, Hawkeye...

SPOTLIGHT: Where're the women at? That's your specialty!

FRANK: There are many women in this book and on the team, but I'm going to let Jeph spill the beans on the team roster. I'll just say that the core original Avengers are in this book – with New Ultimates trying to capture that Avengers feel with 100 times more intensity.

SPOTLIGHT: One of the thrills other artists have pointed out in working on the *Ultimate* books is the chance to redesign some classic characters from the original Marvel U. Who have you been taking on?

FRANK: Pretty much everyone except for Captain America. Everyone else I've had to redesign completely, so it was a challenge because you want to stay true to their classic look while adapting them to the real world situations present in the *Ultimate* books. You can't really have a guy dressed in yellow tights running around, so I'm trying to give them a more functional wardrobe whenever possible.

SPOTLIGHT: But as previous books have said, how functional can it be if you're fighting someone like the Hulk? *(Laughter.)* Speaking of the big green guy, this is your second collaboration with writer Jeph Loeb after working with him on the *Hulk* series. What's it like working with Jeph?

FRANK: Jeph is by far the best and easiest writer that I've ever worked with. He's so generous in his writing – the first thing I remember him saying in both projects we've done together is, "What do you want to draw?" or ,"Who do you want to draw?" Jeph already has a rough story outline done, but he incorporates my ideas into the writing process and it's really great to have that input.

SPOTLIGHT: Can I ask what you asked for in the book?

FRANK: There are certain sequences that I wanted to do – like battle sequences – that were purely visual stuff. And he wrote that in. When I got the script pages and saw that, it got me very excited. Jeph's a great guy, and I can't wait to do more projects with him.

SPOTLIGHT: Before we go, I want to ask about the cover to #1 – everyone's seen covers, but I hear this is something special. Am I right?

FRANK: Yes! We're doing a gatefold cover that I'm finishing up right now. The original artwork I'm drawing measures 24 inches by 84 inches.

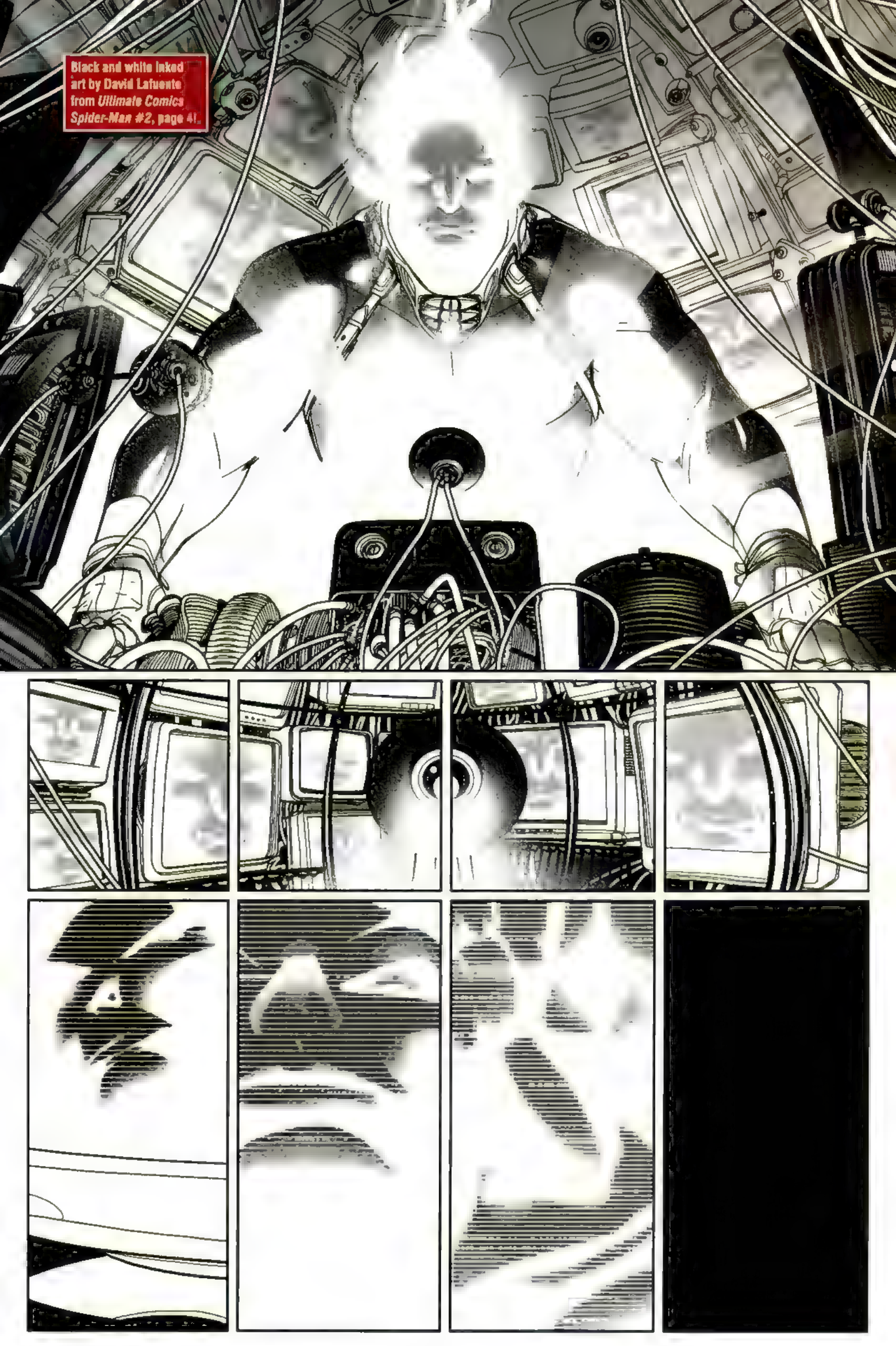
SPOTLIGHT: Wow! That's the size of my sofa!

FRANK: *(Laughter.)* Yeah, it's so big that I can't fit it on my drawing desk so I'm drawing it on my bed. I'm about seventy percent done with that. Hopefully people will like it – I've spent over a month drawing and inking it.

Like it? We love it! Even if we had to hire a moving company to get it through the door! Well done, Frank! And we'll be seeing more of you in NEW ULTIMATES! •

Black and white inked art from New *Ultimates #1*, page 1, by Frank Cho.

Black and white inked art from *New Ultimates* #1, page 15, by Frank Cho



Black and white inked art by David Lafuente from *Ultimate Comics Spider-Man* #2, page 41.

THE ULTIMATE

What's the most intriguing throwdown to be served up by the all-new Ultimate Comics? Cap vs Red Skull? New Ultimates vs Loki? Spidey vs Mysterio? None of them have anything on the clash of the comic book titans that is Millar vs. Loeb vs. Bendis, a three-way tussle for the top in the sales charts. Which writer will reign supreme in the battle for bragging rights? Here's Spotlight's guide to the chances of Marvel's three Ultimate warriors.

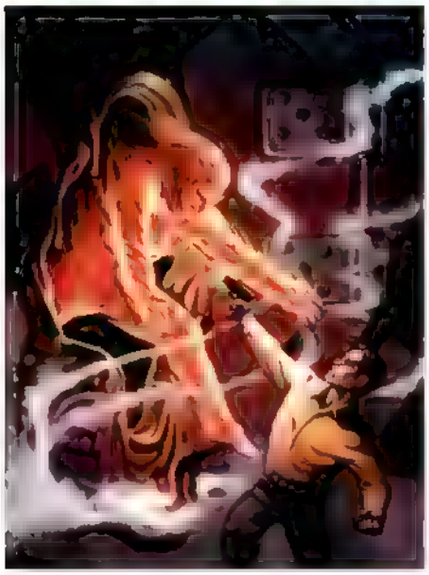
	MARVEL COMICS PEDIGREE	ULTIMATE COMICS PEDIGREE	HOLLYWOOD PEDIGREE	RECENT FORM
MILLAR	Two of the best *Wolverine* runs in *Enemy of the State* and *Old Man Logan*, plus tearing the heroes apart in *Civil War.*	Helped pioneer the UU with *Ultimate X-Men*, established the *Ultimate FF* and wrote the sales juggernaut *The Ultimates.*	Mark's *Wanted* series became a blockbuster starring Angelina Jolie. Next up are *Kick-Ass* and *American Jesus.*	*Old Man Logan* has clawed its way high up the comics chart.
VS. **LOEB**	Stints on *Cable* and *X-Force*, his touching send off for Cap in *Fallen Son*, and adding color to heroes' pasts in *Daredevil: Yellow, Spider-Man: Blue* and *Hulk: Gray.*	Came late to the party, but co-wrote *Ultimate Power* and penned *Ultimates 3* before bringing the house down with *Ultimatum.*	Jeph has written for *Lost*, *Smallville* and *Heroes*, and co-scripted *Teen Wolf* and *Commando.*	*Ultimatum* made waves, while *Hulk* is red hot.
VS. **BENDIS**	Exposing Matt Murdock's secret identity in *Daredevil*, taking super heroics to the MAX with *Alias* and disassembling and reassembling the Avengers. Not to mention Universe-altering epics *House of M* and *Secret Invasion.*	*Ultimate Marvel Team-Up, Ultimate FF, Ultimate X-Men* and *Ultimate Power.* Oh yes, and 133 issues of *Ultimate Spider-Man* (plus annuals), including a record-breaking 110 issue stint with Mark Bagley.	A self-written film version of Brian's *Jinx* will star Charlize Theron, while his *Powers* series is heading to TV screens.	Brian's *Avengers* books have assembled atop the sales charts.
SPOTLIGHT VERDICT	**No question *Civil War* rewrote the rule book, but the way the intricately woven *Secret Invasion* changed the face of the MU means this is BRIAN's *Dark Reign*, and we're all living in it.**	***The Ultimates* takes some beating, but for quality and quantity, BRIAN's commitment to the Ultimate line is unparalleled.**	***Teen Wolf* trumps everything. "Surf's Up," JEPH!**	**All three boast hit books this year, but BRIAN has taken *New* and *Dark Avengers* to the very top.**

CAGE MATCH!

	GREATEST GIFT TO MARVEL	TITLE CAST	TROPHY CABINET	WHAT WOULD STAN CALL THEM?	TRASH TALK
MARK	The Marvel Zombies	*Ultimate Avengers* has Cap, Hawkeye, Iron-Man, Nick Fury and anyone that takes Mark's fancy!	Two Eagle Awards, plus the 2007 Stan Lee Award at the Wizard Fan Awards	Mark "The Thrillar" Millar	"Some call it a competition, I call it a bloodbath."
BRIAN	Rulk!	*New Ultimates* offers Black Panther, Ka-Zar, Shanna, Valkyne, Zarda, plus surprises to come.	Four Eisner Awards, plus an Emmy nomination	"Gentleman" Jeph Loeb	"Take it to Vegas!"
JEPH	Geldof is narrowly edged out by Jessica Jones	*Ultimate Spider-Man* has Spider-Man. Well, some kind of Spider-Man. Brian ain't saying who.	Five Eisners, Five Best Writer gongs in the Wizard Fan Awards	Brian "Michael" Bendis	I am not protecting this city any more. I am running it!!!
	Spinning a gooey nickname into a multi-series franchise that launched a thousand variant covers, MARK is Marvel's Romero.	**That A on Cap's head might as well stand for Avengers – MARK's book has the line-up to beat.**	**BRIAN's creaking shelves put him on top of the rostrum in this category.**	**MARK takes this one, by virtue of having a name that rhymes.**	**Confident as ever, MARK's not afraid to let his pals know his plans to eviscerate them in the sales showdown.**

The Ultimate Old-Boys are neck and neck in Spotlight's run-down, taking four rounds each to Jeph's one. But the upstart who came in at the end and knocked over all the toys in *Ultimatum* can't be ruled out – he ran them close in every category. It's too close to call, and they're all winners in Spotlight's eyes. There's only one thing for sure – the readers themselves will be the ultimate arbiters. •

BULLPEN BULLETINS



ITEM! Put your party hat on, roll out the streamers, light the candles and get ready to sing "Happy Birthday" to the House of Ideas on August 11! Marvel's 70th Anniversary year reaches a rousing crescendo with celebrations at comic shops across the country, and it's you lucky readers who get the greatest gift of all: brand new books a whole day early! Yep, 9 p.m. on Tuesday August 11 sees the release of both *The Marvels Project* #1 and a very special edition of *Marvel Comics* #1, each coming wrapped in both regular and "Party variant" covers. Seven decades after lucky readers were first introduced to Human Torch, Namor and Ka-Zar, you too can feel what it was like to grab off the shelf the very book that started it all – this time with the most dazzling array of colors that 21st century technology can produce. The brightest talents of today – Dean White, Dave McCaig, Jason Keith, Morry Hollowell and Frank D'Armata – turn their palettes to the visionary pencils of industry legends, such as Bill Everett and Carl Burgos. Don't be late on the big day – there's no party without ya!

ITEM! So, unless you've been vacationing on Monster Island, now you'll know what we couldn't tell you when we spoke to Ed Brubaker last month – reports of Steve Rogers' death were greatly exaggerated. Many readers never thought they'd see Cap come back with Ed at the helm, but the writer revealed to us that he's been waiting to confound those expectations the whole time. Said Ed: "All the people online who said Bru will never bring Cap back, Cap won't come back until Ed leaves the book... it's been planned since #25!" After he carried that secret for two years, at least Spotlight knows never to play poker with Bru.

To find Marvel Comics at a local comic shop, call 1-888-COMICBOOK or visit marvel.com

ITEM! As epic as *War of Kings* may be, what happens afterwards could be even bigger! Writing team supreme Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning aka "DnA" are keeping quiet about what the cosmic playing field will look like once the war is over, but they did let slip to *Spotlight* that the fate of Empires will be involved and the cosmic landscape will be forever altered. Speaking with one voice, the pair added: "Check out *War of Kings: Who Will Rule?*, the one-shot by us and Paul Pelletier that follows *War of Kings* as the first step in an epic sequence that will track the fortunes of both sides caught up in the conflict. This paves the way for two miniseries this fall that will take readers into the Realm of Kings!" Don't forget, the aftermath of *War of Kings* can also be felt in DnA's ongoing *Guardians of the Galaxy* and *Nova* titles, which, if you've been reading their cosmic stories, you'll just know are bound to be leading somewhere huge. "There's a cosmic convergence coming," said DnA, "Something so epic and awesome, it'd make Jim Starlin proud!"

ITEM! Marvel's rollicking roster of remarkable writers wows us every single month with their voluminous vocabularies and wonderful wordsmithery. But what if we restricted them to but a single noun or adjective to sum up the immediate future of their titles? *Spotlight* put some of its favorite writers, well, on the spot, and asked them for a one-word tease for their upcoming plotlines. Make of them what you will!

- "Seductive." – Jeff Parker on *Agents of Atlas*
- "X-Men." – Daniel Way on *Deadpool*
- "Groot!" – DnA on *Guardians of the Galaxy*
- "Rulkie!" – Jeph Loeb on *Hulk*
- "Thorcules!" – Fred Van Lente on *Incredible Hercules*
- "Techno." – Zeb Wells on *New Mutants*
- "Riddle." – DnA on *Nova*

THE SOAPBOX

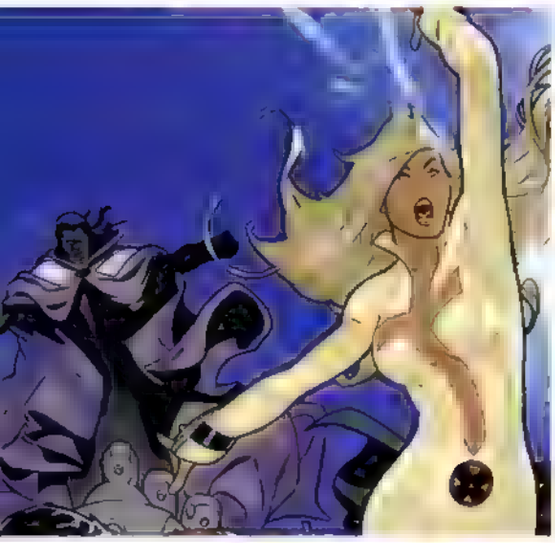
There's no doubt that it's a great time to be a fan of Earth's Mightiest Heroes and our merry mutants. With *New, Mighty, Dark, Uncanny* and *Astonishing* iterations of our two titanic teams, readers can thrill to Avengers assembling and X-Men to-ing and fro-ing every Wednesday. Then, to get them through the long weekends between comic days, more often than not there's a blockbuster movie starring one or more of the groups' card-carrying comrades.

But here at munificent Marvel we don't rest on our laurels. No siree, each and every month we flood the shelves with a torrent of titles with nary an "X" or an "A" to be found. Whisking you from the depths of Hades to Heaven itself, from K'un-Lun to the Kree Galaxy, and stopping off at all points in between, they don't call us the House of Ideas for nothing! But, for any nascent True Believer looking to dip a toe in the wider Marvel Universe beyond the Wolverines, Hulks, Iron Men and Spideys, where to begin? Let *Spotlight's* Soapbox be your guide.

Martial arts and mysticism your thing? Check out the incomparable Iron Fist as his story continues in Duane Swierczynski's *Immortal Weapons* – issue #1 out now. Like a bit of mirth with your mythology? It's buddy comedy all the way as Fred Van Lente and Greg Pak team the Prince of Power and young genius Amadeus Cho in *Incredible Hercules*. Something apocalyptic in your neighborhood? Who you gonna call? Ghost Rider! Writer Jason Aaron has stormed the pearly gates. Catch up on his lauded run, before hopping on board as it comes to a cataclysmic close in the six-issue *Ghost Rider: Heaven's On Fire* limited series, starting this month. And, if Heaven isn't far enough for ya, head to the edge of the cosmos with Marvel's space-faring super heroes in both *Nova* and *Guardians of the Galaxy* – shuttles leaving every 30 days.

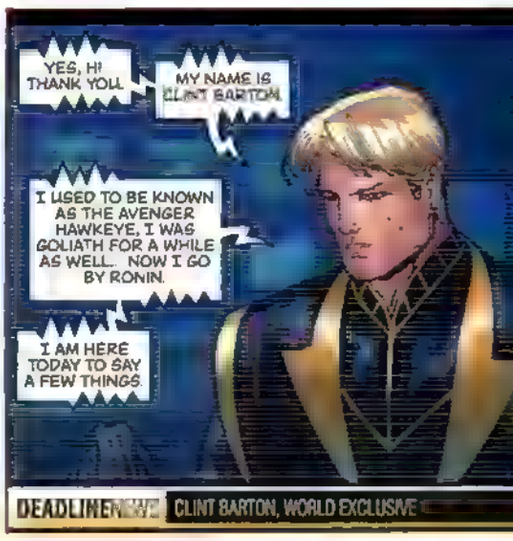
In a perfect universe, each and every one of these colorful characters and their disparate and deserving titles would go toe-to-toe with *Avengers* and *X-Men* at the top of the sales charts. But there's just something about our banner books that have readers flocking to them every month, and who are we to stand in their way? Like a gloating Wolverine told Beta Ray Bill, when our horse-faced alien friend lamented his lack of an ongoing book while Logan appears in so many: "X sells, Eeyore!"

FIVE CHARACTERS WE'RE ENJOYING SEEING MORE OF!



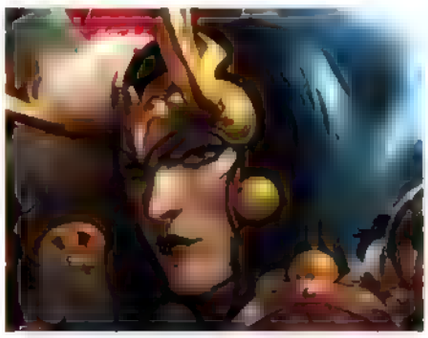
CLOAK AND DAGGER

Though perhaps fitting for a duo bearing their names, Cloak and Dagger have been under the radar for far too long. Despite roles in major events like *House of M*, *Civil War* and *Secret Invasion*, the runaway mutants have failed to find a foothold in the Marvel Universe – until now. Tyrone and Tandy have finally joined a super team – but, since it's Norman Osborn and Emma Frost's Dark X-Men, it remains to be seen whether their luck has really turned for the better. There might be "X"s emblazoned on Cloak's cloak and helping (barely) hold together Dagger's costume, but Spotlight's looking forward to seeing whether this independent twosome can truly handle being team players.


YES, HI THANK YOU.
MY NAME IS CLINT BARTON.
I USED TO BE KNOWN AS THE AVENGER HAWKEYE, I WAS GOLIATH FOR A WHILE AS WELL. NOW I GO BY RONIN.
I AM HERE TODAY TO SAY A FEW THINGS.
DEADLINE NEWS
CLINT BARTON, WORLD EXCLUSIVE

LOKI

The God of Mischief's return in the pages of J. Michael Straczynski's *Thor* has been anything but low-key; turning up a whole different gender is quite a way to make an entrance. There may be something in that whole woman scorned thing, because we don't think the newfound Trickster Goddess was ever as malevolent with a Y chromosome. Whether it's intricately plotting her half-brother's exile in *Thor*, making uneasy bedfellows with Doom (figuratively, you'll be relieved to hear, not literally – yet!) in the midst of Norman Osborn's Cabal, or her manipulative masquerade as the Scarlet Witch in *Mighty Avengers*, Loki has her exquisitely manicured fingers in all kinds of pies.



CLINT BARTON

Norman Osborn may have stolen the kill-shot on the Skrull Queen that ended the Secret Invasion, and ridden the wave of euphoria to his position as the Marvel Universe's new main man, but for us there's only one real star of Dark Reign: Clint "Hawkeye-turned-Goliath-turned-Hawkeye-turned-Ronin" Barton. Clint has stepped up to the plate to take command of an outlaw Avengers team not short of inspirational leaders, including Luke Cage, Captain America and Ms. Marvel. And he's taken the battle to Osborn, waging media war on his enemy in a bid to show the world the truth about the Goblin in its midst. In the pages of *New Avengers*, Clint's back to being the underdog you root for when all the chips are down, which is just the way we want him to remain. Like this, Clint, exactly like this!

GLADIATOR

With lilac skin, pointy ears, a Mohawk, a great outfit, and a host of classic powers, Kallark has always been a striking play on the super hero archetype. But in the pages of *War of Kings* and *War of Kings: Warriors*, fans have been given greater insight into the far-from-mild-mannered, very steely warrior underneath; the man inside the superman. Through turmoil and tragedy, Gladiator has been forced to consider his unswerving loyalty to the Shi'ar throne, and no longer does he "serve at the pleasure of Emperor Vulcan" – and the whole time we've been privy to this very personal journey, courtesy of the introspective writing of Abnett, Lanning and *Warriors* scribe Christos Gage. Will this give Kallark the opportunity to spread his cloak and take on a larger role in the Marvel Universe?

H.E.R.B.I.E.

Call us nostalgic, but we're giddy every time everybody's favorite cartoon robot stand-in makes an appearance. Imagine our excitement when we saw the army of H.E.R.B.I.E.s in *Dark Reign: Fantastic Four!* Judging by writer Jonathan Hickman's rationale (given elsewhere in this very mag), Reed's wide-mouthed floating lab assistant will be a fixture in his upcoming run on the main *FF* title. But the Jack Kirby designed 'bot, who famously usurped Johnny Storm from the FF line-up in the 1970s cartoon, has rarely looked better than in the care of *DR:FF* series artist Sean Chen. Just check out the awesome H.E.R.B.I.E. alarm clock in #3. Get Marvel's merry merchandising division on the phone, we need this thing in stores!

70th ANNIVERSARY FRAME VARIANTS!

Way back when Spotlight was still in its Spidey underoos, Marvel rocked our world celebrating its 25th anniversary with neato mug-shot covers framed by the whole heroic pantheon. Man, it doesn't seem like 45 years ago. In fact, it wasn't – it was 1986. But thanks to some creative math, and a timely change in policy that honors the company's beginnings in 1939's *Marvel Comics #1*, we're turning 70, and breaking out the frame covers again! The "frame variant" covers on a host of August's books will feature full figures front and center, rather than close-ups on our heroes' heads – with the exception of zombie Deadpool, whose full figure *is* just a head. But the real distinguishing feature is the sight of Marvel's best and brightest once more jostling for position around the border; stalwarts like the FF and Spidey rubbing shoulders with newcomers X-23 and Rulk.

And for taking a classic concept and bringing it right up to date, who better than *Young Avengers* and *Illuminati* artist Jim Cheung to do the honors? As far as Jim is concerned, it's a major thrill to be asked to commemorate Marvel's 70th Anniversary in this way. "The last time this was done was over 20 years ago, and by John Romita Sr. no less, so to be asked to do it for the latest celebration was amazing," he says. "I couldn't have imagined it as a kid when I picked up those books for the first time. I think I bought all of them when those covers came out. They were certainly eye-catching and distinctive at the time, and remain memorable to this day."

But the artist admits it was quite a challenge to live up to those cherished original cover frames: "I had to study the original quite a bit to decipher what made the original work so well. I'm not sure I pulled it off, but I tried to keep it as varied and as interesting as possible. I was given a big list of characters that I had to include. At the time of reading, I thought it would be really tough to fit everyone in, but ultimately wound up finding that the numbers could've been higher." He counts the Hulk and Spider-Woman among the most fun characters to draw, but, perhaps fittingly for a cover design celebrating the seven-decade legacy of Marvel Comics, the one standout for him was one of the newest – and youngest – in the company's canon. "The one character I enjoyed the most though is Molly, from *Runaways*," he says. "I may not have drawn her more than a couple times, but each time I do, she brings a smile to my face. I just love her character and her wacky hats." Maybe when Molly hits her own big anniversary for Marvel, we'll get Jim to do special variant covers featuring all our heroes in wacky hats!

"SOLVE EVERYTHING"

"WRITE STUFF"-ER **JONATHAN HICKMAN** TAKES ON THE FANTASTIC

BY JESS HARROLD

Cover art to *Fantastic Four #570* by Alan Davis.

Stan and Jack in the Sixties. John and himself in the Eighties. Jonathan and Dale in the Noughties? In years to come, *Fantastic Four* fanatics may well refer to Jonathan Hickman and Dale Eaglesham's stint on the book in the same breath as the vaunted runs of Lee, Kirby and Byrne – runs that shaped Marvel's first family for generations of readers. Echoing the perfect blend of elemental powers and disparate personalities that make the FF unique, the combination of writer Jonathan and artist Dale feels just a little bit special, a little bit – dare we say – fantastic. In *Secret Warriors* scribe Jonathan, we have a fresh face at Marvel, one of the "Write Stuff" group of talented newcomers brimming with ideas. In artist Dale, we have an industry veteran all set to celebrate a quarter century in comics on the title that first inspired him to pick up a pencil. Some men are born great. Some achieve greatness. And some have "The World's Greatest Comic Magazine!" thrust upon them. With their enthusiasm for the FF infectious, Jonathan and Dale have *Spotlight* thinking they might just tick all three boxes at once.

In his debut gig at the House of Ideas, *Secret Warriors,* Jonathan – a graduate of the Comic Book Idol competition, where he was a very worthy runner-up in its very first year – got his hands on a major Marvel icon, Nick Fury. Now he's writing the team that started it all, first in the recently completed *Dark Reign: Fantastic Four,* and, now, the main event – *Fantastic Four* itself.

SPOTLIGHT: Was it a big surprise when you got offered *Fantastic Four* so early in your Marvel career?

JONATHAN: It was very unexpected. The people at Marvel have been exceptionally good to me, they've given me plenty of opportunities and it seems like everything I do, I end up with more work from them, which obviously is saying that I'm doing a decent job. The great thing about Marvel right now is that they're letting guys tell the stories they want to tell, and some of us are putting out some really, really good product. I'm just appreciative of a place where I can work and tell good stories and just let it fly. It's a big deal getting *FF,* I know that, and I'm very appreciative of it.

SPOTLIGHT: Is it a title you've always enjoyed or wanted to write?

JONATHAN: I didn't read *FF,* it wasn't one of my bigger books growing up. I was a big *X-Men* kid, I mostly read *FF* when it would cross over into the X-books because of Franklin or some Marvel-wide thing. But the good thing is it's allowed me to do a ton of research reading old comics and, by doing that, I don't have a lot of nostalgia for the old stuff. I'm able to maybe read it a little bit cleaner and get a more fair and objective view of how it worked. I don't have to worry about the bad stuff; I can just take the good stuff from it. Stan and Jack, John Byrne...

SPOTLIGHT: Those runs are at the top of everyone's list for sure, but in your research have you discovered any other runs just as good that don't get the same credit?

JONATHAN: Actually, I don't think so. Sometimes these things get overhyped, but I think that in my reading – and I haven't read everything, but I've read a ton of it – it's a fair assessment what people say about John Byrne and Stan and Jack and also Mark Waid's run. I think that's fair and accurate, and there's a valid reason why people love those runs. Sometimes things just click perfectly.

SPOTLIGHT: Have you been reading Mark and Bryan's run? How do you think it measures up? Will you be following up on stuff they've done?

JONATHAN: Look, I'm a massive Mark Millar fan. If I had to pick the best widescreen, bigger-than-life super hero comic, maybe ever, I think it's *The Ultimates.* It's like perfect super-hero comics. I'm using some of the stuff Mark put out in his run that I thought were very interesting But no, I would put it below those other guys. Mark and Bryan got to tell the story that they told and there's some good stuff in there. For me to pretend like it didn't happen... you don't want people to think they wasted their money. It happened.

SPOTLIGHT: While they've been telling their story, your *Dark Reign: Fantastic Four* series has been tied more closely to the rest of the Marvel Universe. Are they your first five *FF* issues?

JONATHAN: Absolutely. We needed a Dark Reign book for the FF, and Tom Brevoort asked me to do it. We thought it would be excellent for a couple of reasons, primarily because it would give me a dry run on the characters. It turned out to be a whole lot more difficult than I thought it would, because all the really great ideas I had I wanted to save for the regular title. It was an interesting experiment. It's a little different, and it's definitely got its own thing going on.

SPOTLIGHT: Going forward with Dark Reign in *FF* itself, does it fall upon you to reconcile what Doctor Doom's been doing in Norman Osborn's Cabal with what Mark's been doing with him?

JONATHAN: I will be dealing with Doom. His stuff with the Cabal will be resolved. How it happens and in what manner is probably not for me to say. I have huge Doom plans, but it's not going to be the first thing that I do. Mark and Bryan are coming off this big Doom arc and it's silly for me to turn around and want to do a Doom story right after.

SPOTLIGHT: In Mark's *FF* run, Ben got engaged, whereas in your *Dark Reign: FF* intro page, he's still linked by a dotted line to Alicia. Dan Slott rekindled their romance a bit in *Thing*, will we see more of them together?

JONATHAN: Um... maybe.

SPOTLIGHT: Good answer! *[Terrible answer! Such a tease! – Ed.]* Now, what aspects do you absolutely need to make a good *FF* story?

JONATHAN. I think you have to be able to tell a story about husbands and wives and best friends and brothers and sisters and parents and children... You have to be tapped into that in some ways.

SPOTLIGHT: Are you a family man yourself?

JONATHAN: Yeah, man, I've got kids. I'm close to my family. But I'm not saying you have to have those things in your life, I'm saying you have to be keyed in to telling a story in which those things are important. You don't want to hit people over the head with it, "Hey, this is *The Waltons*!" But there's got to be a subtlety to what you're doing where it resonates. And I think that the people that don't do quite as good a job on the *FF* kind of miss that.

But I think you also have to wrap that up into these fantastic adventure stories that are beyond the realm of what normally happens in the MU. I mean these guys should be on the bleeding edge of discovery. That also requires maybe a certain type of imagination or a certain view of experiencing life. Or, in Stan and Jack's case, utter and total bizarreness that is just so far beyond the pale that it feels so fresh and wonderful that you're blown away by it.

"You don't want to hit people over the head with it, "Hey, this is *The Waltons*!" But there's got to be a subtlety to what you're doing where it resonates."
– WRITER JONATHAN HICKMAN ON MANAGING THE FIRST FAMILY DYNAMIC.

CROSSING THE BRIDGE: Reed Richards investigates alternate Earths with a fancy contraption, the Bridge, invented by writer Jonathan Hickman. (Art from *Dark Reign: Fantastic Four #2* by Sean Chen.)

IN THIS REALITY, REED RICHARDS AND HANK PYM INITIATED THE REGISTRATION ACT.
PYM DIED OF AN ANEURYSM TWO DAYS AFTER THE LAW WAS ENACTED AND WHILE THERE WAS ONE MAJOR SKIRMISH, 'I' WAS ABLE TO CONVINCE EVERYONE OF THE NECESSITY, AND SANCTITY OF APPEARING TO BE ACCOUNTABLE TO THE LAWS OF MAN.
POINT OF REFERENCE EXAMINE THE POSSIBILITY THAT TONY STARK NOT BEING INVOLVED IS ONE OF THE COMMON FACTORS IN AVOIDING A PROLONGED CONFLICT

And I think it has to be smart. And I don't mean like science class. I think that's a mistake that people make sometimes, by trying to write how smart they are into the book as opposed to the book being smart. Y'know, show don't tell. I think a lot of people confuse *Ultimate Fantastic Four* with regular *FF*. *Ultimate FF* is more of a science book. It's a fine line you have to walk, but I think when you spend a couple of pages explaining how clever you are it's a mistake. I mean there are guys who do it and it serves the story perfectly. Pick any random Warren Ellis book and you're gonna be all right. But there are other people who do not. I think if you can triangulate a position between all those things then you've a chance to succeed on *FF*. Then you need lightning to strike, your book has to hit at the right time and be relevant to now. I don't know, it's like alchemy, right?

SPOTLIGHT: We're picturing you in the lab right now. Do you come to this with much of a science background?

JONATHAN: I made an A in physics. *(Laughter.)* I do my fair share of research and reading in those areas, but I've got a buddy who's, like, a real physicist, and when we get together it's not like me being the smartest guy in the room – more like a dummy. Science in general is at a fascinating place right now. We live in a fantastic time of discovery. The stuff the real frontiersmen on the scientific circuit are doing – and I'm not talking about the theoretical guys, I'm talking about the guys that do it in the lab – is so far beyond what we're either aware of or can imagine. So if you mine that field, there's plenty of stuff out there for you.

UP AGAINST THE CELESTIALS: A hallmark of Hickman and artist Dale Eaglesham's run are the exquisite covers by comic art legend Alan Davis. (Cover to *FF* #572.)

SPOTLIGHT: We talked about family, and one thing recent *FF* writers have had to deal with is not one, but two children. Thanks to the wonders of Marvel time, Valeria seems almost as big as Franklin, and she's now a genius to boot. How old are these kids?

JONATHAN: I actually had a conversation with another writer about this the other day, and they came in with this preconceived notion of how old the kids were. My opinion is that Tom Brevoort knows exactly how old they are! The problem is that none of the artists draw them their actual ages, so it's immediately irrelevant how old they're supposed to be. Y'know, Val is 3 or 4, which is wrong but what everybody is kind of accepting now, and Franklin is 6 or 7. It's weird and it's bizarre, but this is the reality of how eternally young comics properties remain. The problem with Val now – and I love what Mark and Bryan did, I think it's fantastic – is that the younger you make Val and the smarter you make her, the creepier she becomes. You can't have her be a one-year-old and smart and clever like she is. That stops being cool and starts getting freaky. I think 3 or 4 is where she should be, because a baby's a useless character in many ways

"...the younger you make Val and the smarter you make her, the creepier she becomes."

– Hickman on wunderkind Valeria Richards.

VENOM VERSUS VALERIA! Reed and Sue's genius daughter faces down Osborn's evil enforcer. (Art from *DR: FF #4* by Sean Chen.)

SPOTLIGHT: You mentioned you're a dad; do your own kids influence your take on young characters?

JONATHAN: You would like to do something unique and original for the book but there's no way when your kids are the same age roughly as the kids you are writing that some of that stuff doesn't feed in there. But I think I get writing kids, I don't think that's a struggle for me. I think a lot of that is that there's a big piece of my psyche that never got older than twelve. I went out and bought my kid Legos the other day and we just had the best time. My wife at dinner said, "I gotta tell you, I think you were having just as much fun as our boy," and I told her, "Of course I was!"

SPOTLIGHT: You guys should build a H.E.R.B.I.E.! *Dark Reign: FF* certainly isn't short of them...

JONATHAN: I've never understood why there would be only one. Besides Reed getting bored and not wanting to do it anymore. There's always chores to do. If I was Reed, every time Sue asked me to do stuff, I'd just build a new robot. Reed's a practical man that way.

SPOTLIGHT: In *Dark Reign: FF*, Reed is very much taking responsibility for the recent turbulent times in the MU. With your first *FF* arc called "Solve Everything," is that going to be a continuing theme?

JONATHAN: Reed's a good man, and a man of conscience. There's no way that somebody like that could be involved in everything he's been involved in and not enter a period of major self-examination. And when you are who he is and you sit back and you think about what went wrong and have this ability to do whatever you set out to do, there's no way you don't try and fix it. *Dark Reign: FF* is Reed analyzing the problem and figuring out what he might need to do. *FF* starts off with him trying to fix it. But people have this view that Reed is this mega-important character and everybody else is supporting cast – it's like Reed and his merry band of family people. We have a plan to address that.

SPOTLIGHT: And with the team's life being what it is, villains are bound to get in the way of the fixing. Does honoring the Lee/Kirby *FF* legacy mean using the rich roster they created or forging your own?

JONATHAN: Well, hands down the major difficulty in writing the *FF* is that their rogues' gallery is so good that everybody steals it. If you look at all the stuff that's going on with the cosmics and the Cabal, you don't have Annihilus, you don't have Galactus, you don't have Doctor Doom, you don't have Namor, you don't have the Inhumans. Even the Frightful Four people are in The Hood's gang. It really goes on and on. Basically the only major villain of the FF that has gone untouched is the Mole Man, and so, as cool as the Mole Man is – and I think he's an underused and undervalued character – that has to be addressed. I would answer the question like this: Yes, I am writing an *FF* where you will get to see all the cool guys that you love. However, we're gonna be bringing them back on board in such a way that we also have new villains and new foils that relate to those guys. Because we have to build up the rogues' gallery. We desperately have to make some new bad guys.

SPOTLIGHT: How far ahead are you planning?

JONATHAN: I have a pretty concrete plan up to #600. After that I don't know, we'll see. Y'know, I could get fired before then, I could suck, so who knows? *(Laughter.)* I'm just kind of going with the flow. I've signed an exclusive with Marvel, I've got some rope there to turn in good scripts and write good stories.

SPOTLIGHT: Could they involve some interaction between the FF and their pal Nick Fury's Secret Warriors?

"I wanted to go even more radical, but that definitely got shouted down. I'm pretty sure I was right and everybody else at Marvel was wrong, but that's OK."
– Hickman.

ON TOP OF GALACTUS: Mister Fantastic goes into action with the Infinity Gauntlet. Hey, nothing bad could happen there! (Cover art to *FF #571* by Alan Davis.)

JONATHAN: Not in the way that you would think. There's a little tiny bit that is shared between the two books but it's not Reed, it's Reed's dad. There's stuff going on down the road. There's a little bit of incestuous writing there...

SPOTLIGHT: We'll look forward to seeing Nathaniel... The covers during Mark and Bryan's run had a strong magazine flavor, with a new logo. Have you had any influence on how your own covers will look?

JONATHAN. Negotiations are ongoing! We'll see. I wanted to go even more radical, but that definitely got shouted down. I'm pretty sure I was right and everybody else at Marvel was wrong, but that's OK. *(Laughter.)* I think we're gonna try and maybe play around with something retro. We've got a pretty good cover artist on board, you may have heard of him: Alan Davis, he's got some game... One day he's gonna break out. Hopefully he can make a career of it... *(Laughter.)*

SPOTLIGHT: Fingers crossed! Now, we've seen the *Avengers* books muscle aside the *X-Men* titles at the center of the Marvel Universe in recent years. If all went well, could *FF* take its rightful place again?

JONATHAN: Like I said earlier, it is alchemy and it's waiting for lightning to strike. A lot of this stuff is perfect moment and precision and you just hope you can hit it at the right time and what you do resonates. I feel like our FF is going to be that way. Right now when I'm writing it, it doesn't feel big, it feels important. We'll see if that's the case.

SPOTLIGHT: Lastly, Jonathan, if you could choose four words to sum up each member...

JONATHAN: Reed is Super Ego. Ben is Ego. Johnny is Id. And Sue is, um, I dunno, the universal support structure.

Now there's the mark of a good writer – Jonathan doesn't even need four words to get right inside the heads of each of the fab four. Spotlight looks forward to him putting the "dynamic" in psychodynamics monthly in FANTASTIC FOUR.

THE ART OF EAGLESHAM: New FF artist Dale Eaglesham captures the kinetic mayhem of the life with the Fantastic Four. (Black and white pencil art from *FF #570.*)

Black and white pencils by new FF artist Dale Eaglesham from Fantastic Four #570, page 8

THE MARVELS PROJECT

Classic Cap Combo
Ed Brubaker** And **Steve Epting
Connect The Dots On 70 Years Of Marvel History!

By Bob Greenberger

In the 1940s, the Manhattan Project was the codename for the scientists working on the atomic bomb so it made sense that the equally explosive origins of the Marvel Universe be dubbed The Marvel Project. The eight-issue miniseries debuted in July to critical acclaim and a fast sell-out and is the cornerstone to Marvel's celebration of their 70th anniversary.

While the individual origins of the triumvirate that form the core of the super-hero community have been told and retold extensively, this will be the first time their origins, and those of their costumed contemporaries, have been placed into context. Executive Editor Tom Brevoort, the man behind the conception of the Marvels Project, tapped *Captain America* writer Ed Brubaker to tackle the massive project. Brubaker, known for his street-level action and layered plotting, rose to the occasion with tremendous gusto. He spent months in 2008 researching the characters and stories in addition to understanding the real world in the final years of the Great Depression. The result is a story set in the Marvel Universe and covers 1938 through the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

"This year is Marvel's 70th Anniversary as a comic book publishing entity, so we wanted to do a big-scale story that would celebrate and embrace that fact, and cover the length and breadth of the Marvel Universe," Brevoort said in June "Thinking about it, one of the things that's never been explained is where the idea of super heroes within the Marvel Universe came from.

"From the publishing side, it's clear – like everybody else in the burgeoning comic book field, Timely started putting out super hero comics to cash in on the success of Superman. But within the Marvel Universe there was no Superman, so where did the idea of running around in colorful costumes and fighting crime come from? So, starting with that simple premise, we set out to create an 'ULTIMATE ORIGINS' for the Marvel Universe, illuminating the connections between all of the early Marvel characters and creating connective tissue between them and the events we now know will transpire over the next seventy years. So it's an epic with some scope to it, even though it only covers a few years in the late '30s and early '40s."

That connective tissue is seen from the opening sequence in the first issue which opened with the death of the Two-Gun Kid, literally the ending of one era and the beginning of a new one. His attending physician happened to be Dr. Thomas Holloway who would soon become one of the earliest heroes, the Angel. In just one scene, Brubaker clearly showed how one person interacting with another can change the world.

As to why Brubaker was asked to write the project, the editor explained, "Well, Ed's really good, as people who've been following *Captain America* and *Daredevil* already know, and this seemed to be the kind of story he'd really sink his teeth into.

> "The most interesting thing about Namor in the early days was that he was not a hero. He was much more of a bad guy, almost a terrorist, because he hated surface worlders so violently."
> – *Marvels Project* writer Ed Brubaker.

A few years ago, Ed worked with me on *Fantastic Four: Books of Doom*, which was a similar in-depth investigation and expansion of the origins of Doctor Doom. That project seems to have flown beneath a lot of people's radar, but I thought it turned out great and had the flavor of a great Russian novel. So it was clear that Ed could handle this sort of an assignment."

Not only could Brubaker handle the assignment, he had ideal resources to call upon. Jeff Nevins, who has been writing background articles on the pulp magazine heroes for *Incognito*, did the deep digging into how America and the federal government worked in those days. From there, connections that had never previously been obvious presented themselves and Brubaker began writing

It became clear to the writer that this was the story of an arms race. While Nazi Germany was building up its war machine, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was tasking America's brain trust with finding him new weapons and tools. One such weapon readers already knew to be the super-soldier formula, but we now learn that it was the government funding Phineas Horton's work that led to the construction of the Human Torch.

"It's the second world war, so every country with a stake in that war is striving to create super weapons," Brubaker said. "And since this is the origin of the Marvel Universe (on Earth, at least) that means super people. In real life it was the race for the nuclear bomb; in the Marvel world, it's the race for nuclear people, essentially."

Both writer and editor stressed that they wanted the story to feel as if it could have happened in the real America. Brevoort noted, "It's very much like 1939 in the real world. The Great Depression is still going on, and the clouds of war are gathering in Europe."

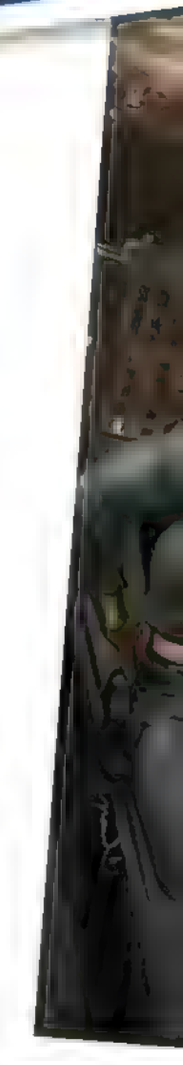
"There's a lot of secret espionage and behind the scenes preparation going on," Brubaker added. "But no heroes yet, although there is a synthetic man in New York who for some reason keeps catching fire."

As for the famed formula from Dr. Erskine, it doesn't make much of an appearance although Erskine himself is a pivotal player. "We're focusing on the really early days, pre-Pearl Harbor," Brubaker explained. "If we do a sequel, we may touch on it more." But readers of the first issue know that the British government was tasked with finding a way to help Erskine escape from Germany and they turn to two Americans to do the dirty work, one of them being a young Nicholas Fury.

THE BIG THREE: Timely's top heroes, Captain America, the Sub-Mariner and Human Torch, grace a variant cover to *Marvels Project #1* by Gerald Parel.

This makes for a more global story despite the birth of the Marvel Universe clearly happening in New York City. When asked to talk about the global picture, including pre-World War II Genosha, Symkaria and Latveria, Brevoort admitted, "I don't know if we'll specifically get to those nations in the course of this story, but we check in with Europe in a significant way in issue #2, as a not-yet-Sergeant Nick Fury and an obscure team of aviators called the Sky-Sharks undertake a mission that'll be crucial to the development of the series."

Without the formula, there won't be much Captain America on hand but Steve Rogers is tucked away from the first issue going forward. Instead, the original Human Torch and the Sub-Mariner take the spotlight. In fact, Marvel's first mutant is given some much-needed motivation for being the angry young man of the sea.



"It's mostly about looking at the history of the period and the history of modern Marvel and its roots in the Golden Age and finding links between all that stuff and letting that guide the story."

– Brubaker on the Marvels Project.

"Isn't Wolverine technically older than Namor?" Brubaker joked. "But yeah, Namor is one of the main characters of this series. We're going to finally see why he hates surface people so much. The most interesting thing about Namor in the early days was that he was not a hero. He was much more of a bad guy, almost a terrorist, because he hated surface worlders so violently." The capture and dissection of the Atlanteans by the Germans is certainly horrifying and the repercussions will be felt in subsequent issues

> "Steve is one of the best artists in comics, and he stages things amazingly well... he doesn't skimp on research either, so it really looks like the era it's meant to be..."
> – Brubaker on *Marvels Project* artist Steve Epting.

But, as readers of the various 70th anniversary specials and *The Twelve* maxi-series know, the Marvel Universe was teeming with heroes back in the early days and they will be seen here, too.

"The golden age Angel is very important," Brevoort revealed. "Professor Horton, Dr. Erskine, Nick Fury, some of the Twelve characters, and FDR for a start. We'll also be seeing and seeding a number of characters throughout who'll go on to greater prominence, as well as characters long-lived enough to have been around during this era. And plenty of nearly-forgotten guys like John Steele, the Sky-Sharks and the Phantom Bullet." Brubaker added, "And a lot of spies."

THE ANGEL: This gorgeous Parel variant to *Marvels Project #2* showcases caped avenger The Angel and another high-flying Timely hero, the Torch.

As for supporting players who were alive during those early days Brubaker acknowledged that Howard Stark, father to Tony, and others will be seen. He confirmed, "There should be some Stark and Logan in this. Maybe some of the Russian programs that created Black Widow, but as I said, we end right after Pearl Harbor."

The intersections of people's lives and histories grew organically, much to Brubaker's surprise and delight. "It's mostly about looking at the history of the period and the history of modern Marvel and its roots in the Golden Age and finding links between all that stuff and letting that guide the story. Using the history modern writers have created -- like the spy who stole part of the super-soldier formula that created the Cap of the 50s - and intertwining that stuff in the early history of that era. It's a really fun and also intensively research-heavy process."

The research led both men to reread a lot of the early stories, many of which have been collected in Golden Age Masterworks but also the ones that have yet to be rediscovered. Both took away from the experience new insights into those hurly-burly days when the rules were still being written and the boundaries seemed limitless.

"I find these early stories fascinating not so much from a story point of view (as they're really nothing to look at most of the time, and the stories are about as simple and formulaic as they come) but as an interesting Rosetta stone to those early days of the development of the super hero genre, back before anybody had worked out the rules," Brevoort noted. "As everybody tried to duplicate the success of Superman, they threw everything at the wall, all sorts of crazy, drunken approaches, very few of which actually went anywhere. On the one hand, there's a lot of craftless enthusiasm in the work, and on the other there's almost a vein of cynicism, copying some of the surface elements that they thought might be the secret to success without actually looking any deeper. Timely's output in those days was really schlock product more often than not, and especially in the books of 1940, it really shows."

"Yeah," Brubaker echoed. "There were a lot of characters who only appeared once or twice. We'll find out why soon."

Still, some modification had to be made to what was established then and what works now. Even Brubaker's

LINKS TO THE GOLDEN AGE: Ed Brubaker's story connects the dots on the fabric of heroes from Marvel's Golden Age. (Variant cover art to *Marvels Project #2* by Steve Epting.)

initial story notes changed as he did the research and began writing earlier this year. "Sure, all stories grow in the telling. Mostly this is as I've researched more stuff, or had my friend Jess Nevins research stuff for me. But the basic arc of this story is the same as I planned it to be," he said

Bringing the story to life was Brubaker's partner on *Captain America*, artist Steve Epting. While it meant the stellar artist had to leave his signature series in the capable hands of Luke Ross and Jackson Guice, it was a welcome decision by Brubaker. "Steve is one of the best artists in comics, and he stages things amazingly well," the writer enthused. "Also, he doesn't skimp on research either, so it really looks like the era it's meant to be, while still making the heroes look cool."

For Brevoort, making the switch in assignment was an easy decision. "As anybody who's followed his work on Captain America knows, Steve can make the classic look modern, while retaining the feel of the period. (Much as he did on *El Cazador* for CrossGen.) So while *The Marvels Project* has a sort of noir sensibility to the worlds and the environments, none of it looks antiquated. His work captures the essence of the era, yet looks very much alive and of-the-moment. And Steve's great at doing action," he said.

"When it comes to the genuine '40s characters," he continued, "we're trying to remain consistent with what had been established, but not make them look too dopey or ridiculous – everything needs to feel plausible. So it's very much like what Chris Weston did in *The Twelve*, or how the producers of the *Watchmen* film handled the Minutemen characters. Not every single button or bare chest may be in precisely the same place, but the essential qualities of the original characters live on. And of course, for any historical figures or venues, Epting is sourcing the hell out of them."

"We're trying to stick to the original designs on all the characters," Brubaker agreed. "But Steve will be gritting them up a bit and making them look a bit more realistic, I think."

The early heroes in the Marvel Universe were virtually ignored until Roy Thomas banded them together in *The Invaders* during the 1970s and that team has been sporadically seen ever since. It wasn't until more recent times that Marvel's colorful past was fully explored by today's creators. This is in direct contrast with DC Comics, which has been successfully mining its Golden Age since 1961.

"DC had some genuine success with characters beyond its big three all throughout the Golden Age," Brevoort explained. "So there were plenty of well-remembered characters and stories to go back to. But at Timely, outside of our big three of Cap, the Torch and Namor, everything else was a tiny blip on the radar, lasting a couple years at most. So other than the most dedicated of comic book historians, there wasn't any real interest in or familiarity with the dozens of obscure throwaway characters that populated most of Timely's output during the '40s." Brubaker added, "I loved the Invaders as a kid, so I always wanted to write stories about this era in Marvel, as you can tell from Cap the last five years."

Going forward, once the series ends in early 2010 and the second seventy years continues, both men assure readers that there will be repercussions felt in future stories. Brevoort enthusiastically said, "Yes, we'll be seeding things and leaving elements behind that can and will be picked up on thereafter. We're not simply telling a retro story here, or a nostalgia story – this is the secret origin of superhuman champions in the Marvel Universe, so it's going to have a lasting impact on where we go in the future."

THE MARVELS PROJECT #1, by Ed Brubaker and Steve Epting, with covers by Steve McNiven, Epting, and Gerald Parel, sees release in August 2009!

HERE SHE IS: Will Miss America appear in the *Marvels Project*? Read and find out! But until then, check out her adventures in Miss America Comics 70th Anniversary Special by Jan Van Meter and Andy MacDonald

MINING FOR GOLD!

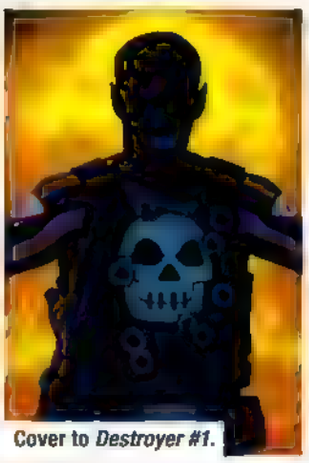
Marvel's been bringing back characters from the early Timely era in a range of cool series, one-shots and specials!

X-MEN NOIR

Cover to *X-Men: Noir #4.*

Starting late last year, Marvel has been producing a series of miniseries in the crime fiction "noir" style. Readers of *X-Men: Noir* should go back and reread the story, noting the large role played by Thomas Holloway, a.k.a., the original Angel.

DESTROYER



Cover to *Destroyer #1.*

Robert Kirkman and Cory Walker presented a daringly dangerous version of the Destroyer character for the MAX line. For sixty years, Keen Marlowe has been a super hero, taking down bad guys and fighting the good fight. But that's all about to come crashing to an end. See, Marlowe is dying — maybe today, maybe tomorrow, the only question is when. But Marlowe isn't about to go quietly into the night. Before he goes, he intends to leave the world a safer place for his family. And if that means hunting down — and murdering — every super-villain he can, so be it.

THE TWELVE

Cover to *The Twelve #1.*

The 12-part saga shows how a collection of obscure (*really* obscure) heroes from the Timely era adjusted (or maladjusted) to life in 2009. Written by J. Michael Straczynski and Chris Weston will soon be wrapped up and the entire saga will be collected in a pair of Premiere Edition hardcovers.

70th ANNIVERSARY SPECIALS

New stories by some of today's greatest talents were coupled with classic reprints celebrating some of the most popular, best known and beloved heroes from the early days of Marvel. If you missed out, here's the complete list of one-shots:

* *Human Torch Comics* by Scott Snyder and Scott Wegener
* *All Winners Comics* by Karl Kesel and Steve Uy
* *Mystic Comics* by Dave Lapham
* *All Select Comics* by Marc Guggenheim and Javier Pulido
* *USA Comics* by John Arcudi and Steve Ellis
* *Marvel Mystery Comics* by Tom DeFalco and Chris Burnham
* *Captain America Comics* by James Robinson and Marcos Martin
* *Sub-Mariner Comics* by Roy Thomas and Mitch Breitweiser
* *Young Allies Comics* by Roger Stern and Paolo Rivera
* *Miss America Comics* by Jen Van Meter and Andy MacDonald

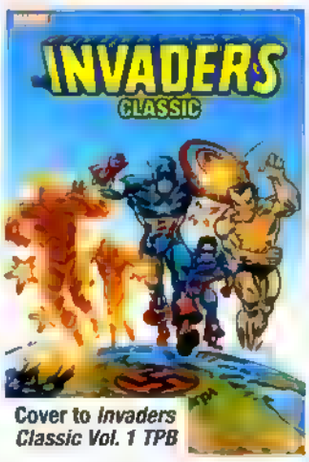
THE INVADERS

Cover to *Avengers/ Invaders HC*

Marvel's first team of heroes recently met the Avengers in a year-long crossover masterminded by Alex Ross and executed by Jim Krueger and Steve Sadowski. The premiere hardcover is due out soon and shouldn't be missed!

Additionally, there are two volumes collecting the original 1970s run of the series as written by Roy Thomas, Ed Summer and Stan Lee with artwork by Frank Robbins, Jim Mooney, Alex Schomburg, Don Rico, Lee Elias, and Al Avison

And of course, there are new exploits being provided by Marvel Digital Comics from writer Allan Jacobsen and artist Scott Kolins. Visit Marvel.com for information on this exclusive, web-only content!



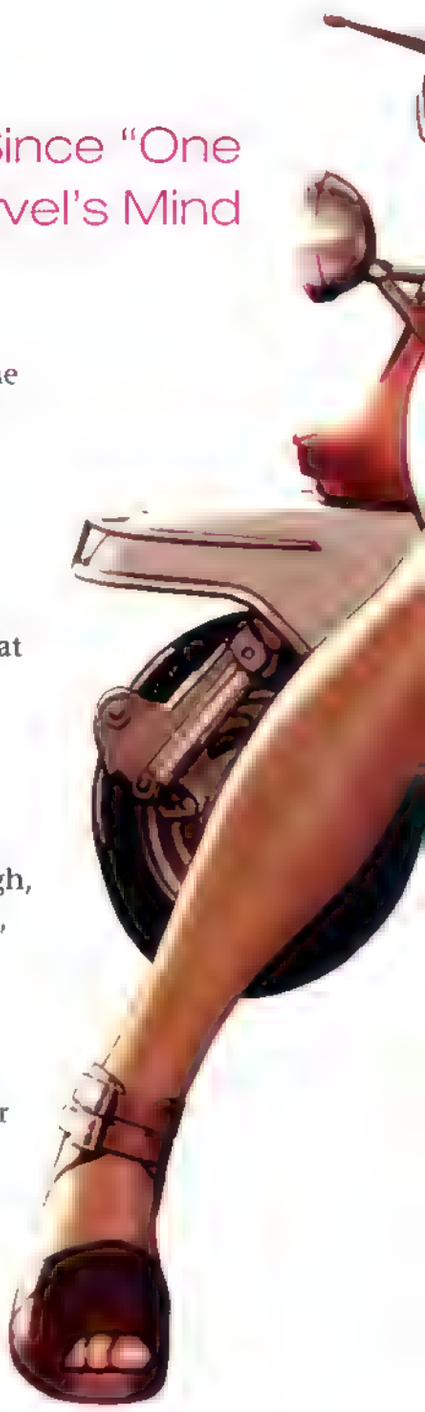
Cover to *Invaders Classic Vol. 1 TPB*

RETURN OF THE Red-Headed Stranger

Though MIA From Peter Parker's Life Since "One More Day," She's Always Been On Marvel's Mind

BY DUGAN TRODGLEN

You may have noticed that "One More Day," the storyline that ended the marriage of Peter Parker and Mary Jane, was a touch controversial. Removing MJ from Peter Parker's life-and the book's supporting cast was more than some people could handle. She is too important a character to just toss aside, they said. Well, it turns out Marvel agrees, and has agreed the whole time. It was merely determined that a little time away from the book was what MJ's character needed, and was what the book needed after the world-shattering events of "One More Day."



Well now she's back! In a blockbuster storyline beginning in *Amazing Spider-Man #601* everybody's favorite redhead is returning to Peter Parker's life. Ah, but how? Why? In what role? That's what the story ("Red Headed Stranger") is for, people! You deserve a sneak peek though, don't you? A little preview of what to expect? After all, you've been so, ahem, patient. Well, here you go, courtesy of "Red Headed Stranger" writer Fred Van Lente.

Fred has been working his way up Marvel's writer ranks for a few years now. He's best known for picking up the *Marvel Zombies* franchise after series originator Robert Kirkman stepped aside and his terrific work co-writing *Incredible Hercules* with Greg Pak. He made his Spider-Man debut with *ASM #589*, which led to his assignment writing *Dark Reign: Mr. Negative*, a limited series involving the mysterious new Spider-Man cast member. From there, he was invited to join the rotation of *Amazing Spider-Man* writers with folks like Dan Slott and Mark Waid. His first big story is "Red Headed Stranger." Talk about pressure! Fred talked to *Spotlight* about what's in store.

SPOTLIGHT: How did you become a – what's the term – "Web Head?"

FRED: Yeah, I guess we, the rotation of *Amazing Spider-Man* writers are officially known as Web Heads. At the recent Hulk summit we decided we needed a competing term, so I suggested the Sultans of Smash. *[Laughter.]* We'll see whether Jeph Loeb, Greg Pak, **** ****** *[That last one's a spoiler, folks! –Ed.]* and I get tagged with that.

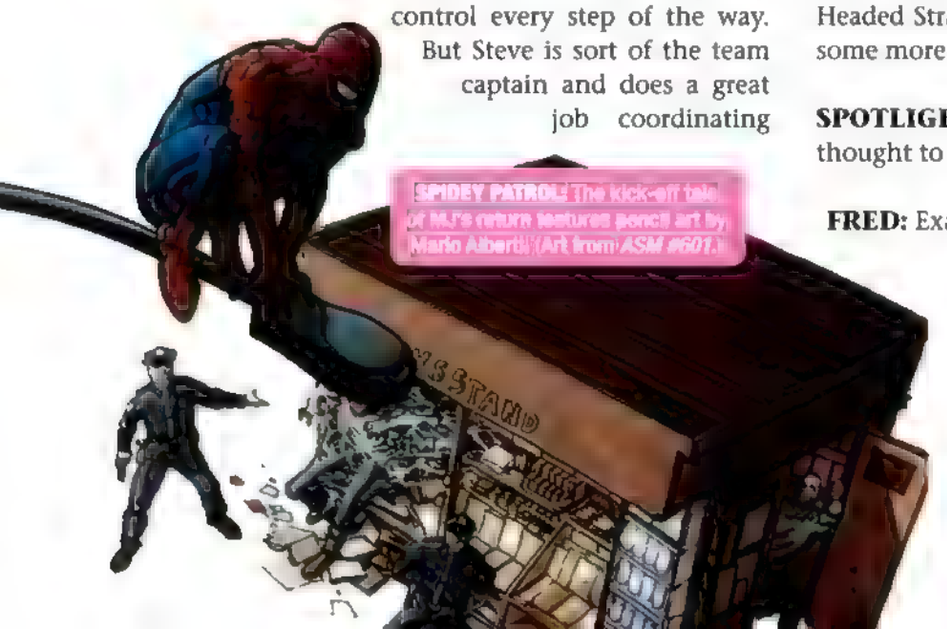
Anyway, I think *Spider-Man* editor Steve Wacker really enjoyed what Greg and I were doing over in *Incredible Hercules*, so he asked me to do a single issue story that – I didn't know at the time – turned out to be kind of an audition. That was *Amazing Spider-Man #589*, featuring the return of the Spot. Marvel liked it so I was given the assignment to write *Dark Reign: Mr. Negative*. I had just started that when Steve invited me to the summit and I was made an official Web Head.

At that summit we plotted about a year's worth of *ASM*. That was in March, and we planned the next several cycles of stories. It was really exciting and fun and we had a great roomful of guys. And as a lifelong Spider-Man fan I couldn't be more excited about the stuff that was percolating in that room.

"...she's been an incredibly important supporting member of pretty much every incarnation of Spider-Man..."
– WRITER FRED VAN LENTE GIVING CONTEXT TO THE RETURN OF MJ

SPOTLIGHT: Steve Wacker seems to be doing such a great job giving the book focus and momentum despite its grueling schedule. What is it like working with an editor who has so much going on with a single title with an ambitious publishing approach?

FRED: It's pretty amazing how much he and Assistant Editor Tom Brennan put into the book week after week. It certainly boggles my mind. He has to put up with six or seven writers. We as Web Heads get sent plots; we get pencils; we get lettered pages; we get colors. We review stuff for continuity and quality control every step of the way. But Steve is sort of the team captain and does a great job coordinating everything.



SPIDEY PATROL: The kick-off tale of MJ's return features pencil art by Mario Alberti! (Art from *ASM #601*.)

SPOTLIGHT: After the setup and establishment of "Brand New Day," the book has been able to recently go bang bang bang from one significant, sort of mini-event storyline to the next, almost ever since "New Ways To Die." We've had "Character Assassination," "24/7," "American Son," and the forthcoming "Gauntlet" (not to mention *ASM #583* with its presidential guest star).

FRED: Yeah, and *ASM #600* – which Dan Slott and John Romita Jr. are doing – is sort of the culmination of the first wave of what started out as "Brand New Day." (That and "American Son" before it.) Now we'll be starting the second wave. If the first wave was the "braintrust" forging their own way – creating lots of new characters and new villains to form a solid foundation – now in phase two you'll start seeing a return of a lot of classic characters and villains. This sort of launches with #600, which features the return of both Doc Ock and Mary Jane.

SPOTLIGHT: That's a good segue into "Red Headed Stranger." The story signals the return of Mary Jane to Peter Parker's world, so how was it decided that it was the right time to bring her back?

FRED: That was a decision that had been made prior to the summit I mentioned. We went into the summit knowing something was going to happen. I think it was as I said, that they wanted at least a year to do their own thing and then start layering the classic stuff on top of that. There was the breakup obviously – that happened off-panel – but after "One More Day" I think they wanted to not have to focus on that aspect of the book.

SPOTLIGHT: So you're saying nullifying the marriage was a big deal?

FRED: From what I hear! I don't have an internet connection so I didn't pick up on it at the time. *[Laughter.]* But now we're going into this new "Red Headed Stranger" story and I imagine we'll be getting some more controversy.

SPOTLIGHT: Oh, by the way, kudos to whomever thought to name it after the Willie Nelson album.

FRED: Exactly. I think that was Wacker.

SPOTLIGHT: After Mark Waid writes the first part, you'll be writing "Red Headed Stranger." How did you get to be the one to pen this important storyline?

FRED: I pitched out an idea for what Mary Jane had been up to since the "Paper Doll"

storyline, when she was last seen *[We highly recommend you look for that Dan Slott/Marcos Martin classic in the BRAND NEW DAY VOL. 3 collection! – Ed.].* It involved why she would return to New York City from Hollywood at this time, and I wanted to integrate one of my favorite obscure and quirky Spider-Man villains, the White Rabbit, into the story. Steve seemed to really like it. That was more or less an MJ solo single-issue story that Peter was slightly involved in.

At the summit it was rightfully determined that MJ's return would require more than a single story. The first chapter of "Red Headed Stranger" sets up many

"Mary Jane is the ex-girlfriend who knows Peter so well but at the same time still has feelings for him..."
- VAN LENTE

elements and many returns, not just Mary Jane. It sort of kicks off this next wave of Spider-Man stories. We had Mark handle that issue because of how many other ripples come from it, and then I come on for the longer story, which also involves the Chameleon. It all culminates in ASM #605, which is the flashback episode to the story with the White Rabbit that I pitched in the first place!

SPOTLIGHT: I'm not familiar with the White Rabbit.

FRED: The White Rabbit is a J.M. DeMatteis creation from an old Marvel Team-Up *[#131 – we looked it up! –Ed.].* We're sort of re-imagining her as "What if Grace Slick became a super villain?" She's a psychedelic crime lord.

SPOTLIGHT: Sounds good! And you'll be using the Chameleon, fresh off of his appearance in the legendary *Amazing Spider-Man #583.* Who would have thought an appearance by the Chameleon could cause a book to shift hundreds of thousands of units! *[ASM #583 featured President-Elect Obama. –Ed.]*

FRED: I know, right? Actually it was the Zeb Wells factor. He should take full credit for that. *[Laughter.]*

SPOTLIGHT: The Chameleon is another classic character making a return.

FRED: Yes. He is of course the very first Spider-Man super villain, having appeared in *Amazing Spider-Man #1.* The Chameleon here is a much more mysterious, a much more dangerous figure than we've seen in the recent past. I hate to use the ancient comic book writer cliché of "going back to basics" but I really am "going back to basics!" He is no longer dedicating his life to trying to get revenge on Spider-Man. There's nothing I dislike more than villains who spend their time trying to get revenge on people.

He's once again a freelance espionage officer and due to

Peter Parker's new job, Peter falls into his crosshairs. The Chameleon is also interested in the mayoral administration of J. Jonah Jameson. All of these events, including MJ's return, sort of collide.

SPOTLIGHT: Going back to Mary Jane – a lot of people might answer this close to the same way, but what is the importance of having Mary Jane in Spider-Man's cast, especially after having been away for a while?

FRED: Well, she's an incredibly important supporting member of pretty much every incarnation of Spider-Man, whether it's the comic book, the comic strip, the movies, the cartoon, what have you. Not always as the wife, obviously, but she's a major part of Peter's world and has been since he was in college. She's important like Harry or Flash or Betty. More importantly, as was established fairly early on in "Brand New Day," until recently Peter and Mary Jane had a very intimate, close relationship that ended for reasons that are still, in the story, shrouded in mystery.

We are going to put a little meat on the bones as to what that breakup was like and what happened, although we will not tell you everything. That is reserved for a very special event down the line. At the Spider-Man summit the details of that story were finalized and we're operating from that back story.

SPOTLIGHT: So your role here is stay consistent with what will ultimately be revealed in full at a later date.

FRED: Right. There is this gap between the end of "One More Day" and the start of "Brand New Day" and "Red Headed Stranger" fills in, I would say, about eighteen percent of the gap.

SPOTLIGHT: *[Laughter.]* There's a nice specific figure. I hope folks are satisfied!

FRED: Well, I doubt it! *[Laughter.]*

SPOTLIGHT: Where is Mary Jane's head at as we start "Red Headed Stranger?"

FRED: She's moved back to New York for professional reasons. She's working on a TV show. She is not averse to seeing Peter but there is tension there, as one would expect after a breakup. But I think, and certainly hope, that folks are going to be pleased with the new dynamic where Mary Jane is the ex-girlfriend who knows Peter so well but at the same time still has feelings for him. It's a really neat dynamic and a way to use the character where she's kind of a love interest but not really a love interest because they've kind of "been-there-done-that." It's a unique way of using the character, apart from the wife or the girlfriend, or as she was originally conceived, this unobtainable ideal of femininity. This Mary Jane is older, wiser, has been through some tough times, and I think here characterization will reflect that.

Mamas, don't let your babies grow up to write comic books – but if they do, they could do worse than emulate the talented Fred Van Lente! Look for Mary Jane's return in AMAZING SPIDER-MAN #601! •

SPIDEY'S NEW NEMESIS: MR. NEGATIVE

"Red Headed Stranger" is not the only Spider-Man story Fred Van Lente has on the stands. *Dark Reign: Mr. Negative* is a three issue series that focuses on the character established in the earliest days of "Brand New Day" and how he fits in with the sinister visions of Norman Osborn and NYC crime kingpin, the Hood. Fred filled us in a little on his Dark Reign tie-in.

SPOTLIGHT: How does Mr. Negative fit in with Norman Osborn's Dark Reign?

FRED: A couple of different ways. One is, in the "New Ways to Die" story, it was established that Mr. Negative "inherited" all of the Chinese immigrants that Norman Osborn had been experimenting on. Then in an *Amazing Spider-Man Extra* story, we saw Mr. Negative ripping off an Oscorp shipment. So he and Norman Osborn are not exactly best buddies. And he and the Hood don't exactly get along because the Hood controls all of the super-villain action in the five boroughs except for Chinatown, where Mr. Negative is.

SPOTLIGHT: Sounds like some stuff is about to go down.

FRED: Yeah. The plot of the limited series revolves around the Hood – with the help of H.A.M.M.E.R. and Osborn – throwing everything he has at Mr. Negative to take him out and take over Chinatown. Mr. Negative of course fights back. He has his henchmen, the Inner Demons, as well as Hammerhead, as set up in that great story by Joe Kelly and Chris Bachalo *[Indeed it is great, and available in the Spider-Man: Crime and Punisher Hardcover. –Ed.]*. He also has a new henchman: Spider-Man! He has corrupted Spidey with his "negative touch."

At the same time Betty Brant is investigating, trying to find out who Mr. Negative really is for the DB. She comes very close, but the reader actually discovers everything. By the end, we find out who Mr. Negative is, what his connection is to Martin Li and…his origin!

SPOTLIGHT: Was this story more or less planned anyway, and then fell into place with Dark Reign?

FRED: Yeah. Mr. Negative was first featured in the Brand New Day arc by Slott and Steve McNiven and Dan was gracious enough to spend quite some time with me on the phone talking about the character. He explained things like his powers, all of which he hadn't yet revealed, and his origin. So I stole all of that wholesale and it is now in *Dark Reign: Mr. Negative*.

DARK REIGN: MR. NEGATIVE is on stands now!

DREAD KNIGHT

ARSENAL

ULTIMATE ARMOR WARS!

We didn't have room to get into Warren Ellis and Steve Kurth's four-issue mini Ultimate Armor Wars, the first issue of which is due in August, but it's just as sizzling a summer event as anything else! Before you dig into the series proper, dig these cool armor concept designs by Steve Kurth!

OLD SCHOOL IRON MAN ARMOR

FIREPOWER

NEXT ISSUE:

The Original Zombies Are Back! Just in time for Halloween!

Plus: Inside Dracula's Tomb With Marv Wolfman And Gene Colan!
Zombie Deadpool With Victor Gischler!
Inside Pre-Code Horror Masterworks And More!

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"Red-Headed Stranger"
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August-September 2009